Shadows of Glimwood

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Over the Mountains

The wind came down from the high teeth of the world with a sharpened edge, worrying at the cloaks, tents, and dangling pots that rattled against the party's packs. Snow hissed off the rock as if the mountain were a great file being drawn across the sky. They had left the last stunted pines a day ago, and since then the path had been nothing but grit and ice and the dull, patient climb that wore on thigh and temper alike. Yet the five of them moved with the familiarity of people who had learned one another's weight and rhythm. Ropes passed back, boot prints kicked wider for shorter legs, a hand ready at the worst steps. They were a hard-stitched friendship, ugly in places, strong where it counted, and on this road to Albardack they would need all of it.

"Hold," said Gundur, voice a gravelly rumble swallowed by the wind. The mountain dwarf planted his broad boots and tilted his head like a hound scenting. Hoarfrost silvered the braids in his beard; a little gray nose poked from the fold of his collar and whiskers twitched at the air. The mouse, called Squeek by everyone but Gundur who insisted it was "the Small Watchman," vanished again as the dwarf adjusted his shield and leaned into the gust. Gundur had the look of storm-chiseled granite, scar lines like old fault seams, the stance of a veteran who expected rock to give way under him and so never trusted it twice. He had been born under stone, down in the hearth-caverns of Hammerfast Reach, second son of a lamplighter and a shieldmaker. He grew up on the disciplined cadence of the barracks drum and the clangor of anvils, a boy who learned that respect follows the point of a blade and the steadiness of the arm that holds it. His mother used to tell him that patience is a sharper weapon than any sword. He found, early and repeatedly, that the two work best together. As a youngling he spent his time in wrestling pits and tunnel runs, the kind of games that bred small kings of bruises. He had an older brother—Darin, bright-eyed and born to inherit the shieldmaker's oath—who vanished with a caravan when the Undermarch collapsed. Gundur's first major scar came from digging in those broken halls until his fingers bled and the rock finally told him there was nothing left to find. The army took him in, and he traded the ache of a brother's absence for the clean arithmetic of orders, enemy, victory. Even now, when he speaks, there is the clipped certainty of a soldier who expects to be obeyed. He is not gentle; he is reliable, and in a world as fickle as weather that counts for more.

Cyra, marching just behind, offered a skeptical hum that fogged in the air and vanished. He was a hill dwarf with eyes like wet ink and a mind that never stopped tallying angles. Where Gundur was iron hammered to shape, Cyra was a scalpel, honed and kept in a velvet wrap, more dangerous for his restraint than any display of temper. He had not been raised to the drum; he had been raised to the quiet arrogance of books. His parents kept a counting-house on the sunward side of Greymantle Hill, and from his earliest days he learned to love columns that lined up, numbers that behaved, rules that bent when you knew where to press. He devoured treatises and grimoires borrowed on false promises and returned with marginalia sharper than the authors' own thinking. His teachers found him brilliant and exasperating, forever mistaking moral questions for poorly phrased problems. When a fever took his

younger sister, he watched the priest's comforts slide off grief like water and resolved to master the language that could out-argue death. That resolution turned him toward evocation, not for its spectacle but for its certainty; flame is the purest answer to a world that hides too much in the dark. He spent his youth courting danger in the form of knowledge—breaking warded locks on university towers, copying spells by night, buying secrets with cleverness he called currency. If remorse ever knocked, it found a door barred by the promise of greater power. He speaks little on the march, saving breath for higher work, but when he does it is to cut through a problem like sunlight through cloud.

"You hear something?" Cyra asked, tapping frost from the ferrule of the staff he carried. The staff was black and quiet and seemed to drink light even on the snow, an heirloom of a darker patronage than he cared to explain on a mountainside. "Or is this one of your mountain moods?"

"I hear trouble thinking about becoming brave," Gundur said. "Wind carries it sideways. Rocks are too new broken. Keep your wards on a leash."

"Always," said Cyra, and that single word held both promise and threat.

Higher up the switchback, Indra moved like a thought the mountain hadn't yet had time to regret. The elf kept to the edges where snow crusted thinly, her boots whispering over ice that would have thrown a heavier step. She had the long, clean lines of a forest-born dancer and the reserved gaze of someone who preferred listening to speaking. Her childhood belonged to the canopy of the Northglade, where the world is a cathedral of trunks and light and leaf-shadow. Her parents were keepers of paths, mapping migrations of wind and bird and beast, teaching their daughter that the first language is the line an arrow draws from bow to target. She had a younger brother who delighted in mirrors and songs, a bright contrast to Indra's silence. He vanished in a spring flood that shook the roots of their lives. After the river returned to its banks, Indra found that she could no longer be content with known trails. She took to the wild borders where hunters and poachers tested the patience of spirits, where the sky widened and the rules of her people narrowed to essentials. Bow in hand, she learned to read the world in broken grass, bent twig, old ash. She met people only when necessity demanded and left them as soon as wisdom suggested. Indra measures friendship in the same units she measures distance—line of sight, field of fire, the reliability of a hand when weight must be shared. Of the party, she speaks least, but she is often the first to notice when silence is needed or when a word, clean and exact, can save an hour of argument.

Ardan Velin came from somewhere entirely different: chandeliers and court whispers, the long corridors of mirrors where you learn to watch yourself watching others. Her father was a second son who learned to turn insignificance into leverage; her mother, a lady of precise tastes who collected obligations like jewelry. Ardan's nursery had more tutors than toys. She learned manners as spells and spells as manners, discovering early that prophecy is simply etiquette with time. While other children played at knights and dragons, she practiced reading faces and futures, stacking cards of fate until they made a house she could live in. A younger cousin was groomed for the spotlight her parents once wanted for her, freeing Ardan to haunt the libraries that underpinned the family's power. She grew fascinated by patterns that

crossed years the way geese cross a lake, and by the knowledge that sometimes the smallest nudge alters a river's course. Her youth was not unhappy, but it was watchful, the happiness of someone who enjoys the puzzle more than the party. When scandal nibbled at her father's name—a bartered letter, a duel nearly fought—Ardan demonstrated that foresight is a currency the rash will always borrow. She prevented bloodshed and quietly made sure the right debts fell due. That success whetted an ambition beyond salons. The road offered a cleaner laboratory than the court. She learned to divine storms before they bloomed and lies before they were spoken, and she carries herself now with the calm of a woman who has seen several outcomes and selected one.

Korin Duskbane is the last of them and somehow their hinge. He grew up in the narrow streets below the cathedral of Bellwether, a wedge of city where cobbles remember every footstep. His mother was a healer with tired hands, his father a scribe whose ink-stained fingers never quite let go of grief after their first child died still and small. Korin discovered early that the boundary between the living and the lost is porous. He dreamed of faces he hadn't yet met and woke with the shapes of their names in his mouth. Where some children chase games, he chased reasons, lurking at the back of sermons and at the edge of alleys where charms were traded under breath. He apprenticed himself to a scholar who mistook the boy's quiet for obedience and found, to his irritation, that curiosity has its own liturgy. When the plague-room filled and emptied and filled again, Korin learned what he could save and what he could not, and the difference left a mark that looked like resolve to some and defiance to others. He walked out of Bellwether with a blade kissed by morning and prayers that bent toward the dead not as enemies but as errors, the kind that can teach if you listen. He has the dry humor of a man who knows sleep will not come easily and the practical kindness of someone who understands bandages and boundaries.

They met the way flint meets steel—by accident to some eyes, by design to others. Ardan would say she noticed the weave thinning around a border-town called Fennacre, a place with a millpond, three taverns, and one too many disappearances. Cyra would claim he followed a rumor of a staff lost to a lich's apprentice and calculated that other seekers would make useful distractions. Gundur might admit, if ale softened his tongue, that he was hired to keep order on a caravan crossing the Fennacre flats and found the company more profitable than the pay. Indra tracked a stag into town and discovered it was a man wearing a stag's shadow, a poacher with a talent for vanishing and a habit of leaving victims behind. Korin, drawn by the taste of wrongness in the air, came to ring a bell the locals had forgotten how to ring. The night the five of them crossed paths, the tavern was full of rain and bad stories. A fight sparked at one table and died at another, and by the time the candles guttered a pact had been made that none of them would have signed that morning. They hunted the shadow-poacher into the millrace and found the truth to be a drowned ritual wearing a human face. Cyra burned the rot to paste, Gundur broke the circle with a blow that cracked stone, Indra's arrow pinned a charm just as it tried to slip into Korin's chest, and Ardan's cool voice counted seconds until the tide of the curse turned. It was not friendship then. It was efficiency. Friendship came later, over the slow heat of campfires and the small confessions road-companions trade when the dark has already made them honest.

Now, on the mountain, efficiency and friendship looked the same. Korin paused to flex feeling back into his numbed fingers and glanced at the sky's bruise-dark horizon. "We'll want to make a lee before the next line of teeth," he said. "The weather's thinking uncharitable thoughts."

Ardan shaded her eyes with a gloved hand. "Two hours to the saddle, if we price the wind generously. I'd rather pay now than later."

"Price it however you like," Gundur said, setting his shoulder to the climb again. "We pay in boot leather either way."

Indra pointed with the tip of her bow. "Cornice ahead. The snow's lying about its loyalty."

Cyra smiled without warmth. "Then let's interrogate it carefully."

They moved. Ropes came off shoulders and found purchase around a black, patient boulder. Indra went first, probing with an arrow shaft where the drift pretended to be ground. Gundur followed, weight sure, testing every step as if he could bully the mountain into respecting him. Cyra and Ardan traversed the safer line, anchors of thought and ward shimmer, while Korin watched the slope above, eyes measuring risk like a physician measuring dosage. When the cornice did go—just a sigh and a slither and then a long, cold whisper down the chute—they were already across, breath fogging, hearts kicking, hands steady because they had been shaky too many times before to be surprised by it now.

They found a pocket of rock that turned the worst wind into a sulk, scraped together a fire that burned more stubbornly than brightly, and ate in the workmanlike silence of the truly hungry. Steam rose from the pot, smelling of salt and something that had once been called fish by an optimistic merchant. Squeek made a daring dash to a crumb and then an even more daring retreat when Gundur's big thumb nudged it back toward warmth.

"Tomorrow?" Korin asked.

"Tomorrow," Ardan said. "And the next after that."

"Albardack doesn't move," Indra added. "We do."

Cyra glanced at the staff laid across his knees and then at the fire. "We move until it is more convenient not to."

Gundur grunted, a sound that could have been agreement, and fed the fire another stick the size of a spear. Outside the pocket, the mountain kept breathing its cold, great breath. Above them the stars were hard and bright, like nails driven into a frozen roof. Below somewhere was a town with a name they had begun to say like a promise. Albardack. They would get there. First the wind, then the stone, then the road. One step, then another, until the mountain gave them back to the world.

Morning came late to the high passes, the sun crawling reluctantly above jagged ridges and scattering weak light that did little to fight the cold. The fire had burned down to a blackened

knot of embers in the lee of the rocks, and their breath hung over it like ghosts reluctant to leave. Gundur was already on his feet, buckling on his half plate, muttering something in Dwarvish that made Squeek dart from one fold of his collar to another in restless protest. The rest stirred in slower layers, each of them knowing that once they broke camp, warmth would be a memory replaced by the long ache of the climb.

The mountains were unkind in ways that went beyond the obvious cold. Ice sheathed the stone in places where no frost should cling, clinging to windward faces as if the air itself was unwilling to let go. The path narrowed to single file, forcing them into a silent march broken only by the clink of weapons and the crunch of boots in snow. Indra led now, her eyes scanning the ledges above and the powder-smooth drifts that might conceal nothing or might conceal death. She moved with the patience of a hunter, pausing to signal when she saw cracks spidering through the crust ahead. Behind her, Korin kept his gaze low, not from weariness but to read the snow's story—the deep, wind-carved channels, the older prints of a shaggy-footed goat, the fresh claw-marks of something larger and far less benign.

They spoke little, but the mountain's silence had a weight that encouraged thought. Cyra's mind wandered to his own youth, a time when the sharpest discomfort he had known was the absence of an answer to a question. Back in the counting-house of his parents, warmth had been constant, bread plentiful, and the worst hardship was the tedium of bookkeeping lessons. Yet here he was, breath steaming in a thin ribbon, his fingers aching despite the staff's faint pulse of protective magic. Ardan, walking just ahead of him, seemed immune to the cold altogether, her face set in that calm mask that had unsettled more than one opponent at the gaming tables of her youth. She had been taught to ignore discomfort until it ceased to matter, and that training served her well now.

Gundur's thoughts were less abstract. He measured the slope in his mind against a thousand others he had climbed in armor, recalling the weight of different snow types underfoot, the treachery of shale under a thin dusting of frost. He tested each foothold before shifting his full weight, aware that the rope between him and Indra was as much for her protection as his own. Squeek poked his nose out briefly, sniffed, and retreated; Gundur took the omen as agreement that they should push through the next stretch without rest.

At a narrow section where the trail curved along the lip of a sheer drop, they paused. Below lay a chasm so deep the light seemed to fade before it reached the bottom. The wind howled up from it in a steady roar, carrying with it the metallic tang of snow and something older, something that had not moved in centuries. Korin knelt and ran his fingers along the edge, feeling for signs of recent collapse. "This was wider last winter," he murmured. "The mountain's biting itself."

"Then we don't linger in its mouth," Gundur replied, taking the lead across. His broad form cut a path in the snow, and the others followed in his exact steps, each bootprint a promise to the one behind that the footing held.

Halfway across, a shadow moved above them. Indra's hand went to her bow, but the shape resolved into nothing more than a snow-laden bough breaking free far above. It hit the slope

with a muffled whump, sending a powdery cascade into the abyss. No one spoke until they were safely past.

The day wore on, the sun making only half-hearted attempts to pierce the clouds. The mountain was a study in white and gray, the occasional lichen-covered rock the only splash of color. They passed the frozen remains of an old waymarker, its carved runes eroded to meaningless scratches by centuries of wind. Ardan brushed her gloved fingers over it, as if searching for a memory in the stone, but moved on without a word.

By late afternoon, the wind sharpened, driving needles of ice into every gap in their clothing. Gundur called a halt in the shadow of a cliff where a thin overhang offered minimal shelter. “We rest here. Ten minutes.” The order was met with silent relief. Cyra knelt to trace sigils in the snow, tiny wards to discourage wandering predators. Korin poured a little hot water from his flask into his hands, breathing the steam before taking a sip. Indra simply stood, eyes closed, listening to the mountain’s voice in the wind. Ardan used the time to study a small crystal orb, her lips moving in a silent calculation that might have been a spell or merely a prediction of the weather.

“Two more days at this pace,” Gundur said at last. “If the sky doesn’t decide to bury us.”

“Then let’s keep moving,” Indra replied, already slinging her bow. “The mountain won’t wait.”

They set off again, each step carrying them further into the high silence, where even thought seemed to crystallize and fall away like snow. Somewhere ahead lay Albardack, but for now, there was only the climb.

The third day on the mountain began in darkness. A front had rolled in overnight, thick clouds blotting out the stars and stealing what little moonlight had made it through the high passes. When they broke camp, the world was reduced to a narrow tunnel of visibility, every edge softened by swirling snow. Their cloaks hung heavy with frost, and the sound of the wind was a constant, low moan as though the peaks themselves were mourning something long lost.

Indra took point again, her hood drawn low, eyes narrowed against the biting gusts. The world beyond her vision might have been another realm entirely, unreachable and indifferent. Behind her, Gundur trudged with a stubborn rhythm, his greatsword’s hilt rising over his shoulder like the head of an axe buried in a stump. Squeek stayed hidden deep in the folds of his collar, only occasionally shifting as if to remind his master that he still lived. The dwarf’s boots broke the crusted snow in steady beats, leaving deep, deliberate impressions for the others to follow.

Cyra’s staff was aglow with the faintest ember of arcane light, enough to keep the line together but not so much as to announce their presence to anything watching from the slopes. His mind worked furiously even as his feet moved on autopilot, silently cataloging the dangers of frostbite, exhaustion, and the possibility of magic gone awry in these conditions.

More than once he caught himself tempted to summon a wall of force against the wind itself, but he knew the futility of challenging the mountain on its own terms.

Ardan kept close to him, her gaze unfocused in a way that meant she was scrying the near future. Her fingers traced the faint outline of Portent dice in a hidden pocket, and her breath came slow, measured, as if she could control the weather by refusing to hurry. She didn't share what she saw in the weave; she rarely did unless the pattern shifted to something that demanded immediate action. To the others, her composure was a comfort. To Ardan herself, it was armor.

Korin brought up the rear, his eyes constantly scanning their back trail. The snowfall had already begun to erase their path, but something in him insisted on marking every shadow, every tree-limb shiver, every stone out of place. He had seen the prints of wolves earlier—larger than they should have been, more spread out than a normal pack's—and though the wind had covered them quickly, he carried the knowledge like a weight. A quiet prayer hummed at the edge of his breath, not to ward off the wolves but to ask the spirits of the mountain for a safe passage. In return, the mountain gave him nothing but silence.

By midday, the trail funneled into a narrow gorge where the wind screamed through like a living thing. The walls rose sheer and close on either side, ice clinging in thick veins to the stone. Snow devils spun in erratic dances, vanishing as quickly as they formed. Gundur shouted back a warning, his voice barely carrying over the gale. "Keep your ropes tight! Ice falls here!" He wasn't wrong—halfway through, a slab of ice broke free above, shattering against the rocks in a crystalline explosion that sent shards skittering across their path. They pressed forward in tense silence until the gorge widened again and the wind dropped to something short of murderous.

They stopped in a hollow between two ridges, sheltered enough to take a moment. Cyra used the lull to strike a spark, coaxing a brief flame to life with the care of a jeweler working gold. The others gathered close, letting the heat soak into their fingers. Indra crouched, scanning the ridge lines ahead. "Storm's moving west," she said. "We can push through the saddle before nightfall if we're fast."

"And if we're not?" Korin asked.

She glanced at the darkening sky. "Then we sleep under it."

Gundur grunted. "Not sleeping under anything tonight. We're crossing."

Ardan's eyes flicked from one face to another. "If we go, we go now. The longer we wait, the more the storm decides for us."

It was settled with a round of nods. The fire was stamped out, gear hefted back into place, and the line reformed. The climb to the saddle was steep and relentless, the snow thinning until the wind scraped bare rock under their boots. The air grew thin, each breath pulling at their lungs. By the time they reached the top, the light was already draining from the world, leaving the sky a slate-blue canvas streaked with dark cloud.

From the saddle they could see the next stretch of their journey: a long descent into a valley where jagged iceflows glimmered faintly in the fading light. Beyond, the mountains rose again, cruel and sharp, their tops lost in the storm. Albardack lay somewhere past those peaks, a fact they clung to not because it was certain, but because it needed to be. They began the descent, boots slipping on treacherous rock, the ropes between them taut with mutual trust.

Night found them halfway down, forced to make camp on a ledge barely wide enough for their tents. The wind here was quieter, the mountains themselves serving as a barrier. They ate quickly, each lost in their own thoughts. Only Gundur broke the silence, his voice low. “Tomorrow we see Albardack. One way or another.”

No one argued.

The night was long and brittle, the kind where every creak of the tent poles and every sigh of wind through the rocks felt amplified. The mountain seemed to breathe around them, its slow exhale making the canvas shiver. They took turns at watch—Gundur first, then Indra, then Korin—each sitting hunched near the small, well-hidden fire that glowed like a ruby in the dark. The flames were shielded from the wind by a makeshift wall of snow blocks, their light catching now and then in the facets of ice clinging to the cliffside.

When Gundur’s watch ended, he woke Indra with a shake that was firm but wordless. She emerged from her blanket without complaint, adjusting her bowstring and scanning the darkness as though she could see beyond the curtain of night. The elf had an uncanny way of staring into the void until it stared back, and more often than not, it blinked first. Tonight, however, the darkness yielded nothing but the faint glimmer of frost where the moon occasionally broke through the clouds.

Korin’s turn was quieter still. He sat with his back to the cliff wall, the Bead of Force rolling idly between his fingers. He didn’t pray aloud—he rarely did—but his eyes roamed constantly, picking up every shift in shadow, every ripple in the snow. Somewhere far below, wolves howled, the sound thin and eerie in the rarefied air. He neither smiled nor frowned, simply took the sound as fact and filed it away. By the time Ardan rose for the morning, the howls had faded, leaving only the persistent groan of wind.

The day broke sharp and white, the air clear in a way that seemed almost fragile. They moved quickly, packing camp with practiced efficiency. A pale sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows that reached like claws across the slope. The descent steepened here, forcing them to angle sideways down the mountain rather than risk a direct drop. The snow was softer in patches, treacherously so, hiding uneven rock beneath. Gundur went first, bracing himself to arrest any slip from those behind him. His grip on the rope was absolute; when Cyra stumbled once on a loose stone, Gundur’s arm shot out and hauled him upright before the wizard could lose balance.

“Careful,” the dwarf muttered. “This rock’s got no loyalty.”

Cyra gave a curt nod, brushing snow from his gloves. “I’ll remember to question its allegiances next time.”

By midday they came upon an old hunter’s shelter, little more than a collapsed frame of wood half-buried in snow. Indra inspected it while the others rested. “Abandoned for years,” she reported. “But it’s near a run of meltwater. We fill our skins here.” Korin took her advice and followed the thin thread of water to where it seeped from the rock, breaking the ice crust with the hilt of his sword before collecting the clean flow.

The valley floor lay ahead, a great sweep of ice and stone hemmed in by ridges that looked like the backs of sleeping giants. The descent into it was punishing—icy switchbacks that tested every muscle, ropes scraping against the rock as they inched their way down. The cold here was different, heavier, as though it had settled into the bones of the valley and would not be moved.

When they finally reached the bottom, the wind died almost entirely. The silence felt unnatural, the kind that suggested something was listening. They crossed the valley in a long line, each keeping a wary eye on the jagged ice formations that rose like teeth from the ground. Once, Korin stopped abruptly, staring at a particular spike of ice. “That’s not natural,” he said softly.

Ardan followed his gaze and tilted her head. “Something froze too quickly. Magic, maybe. Old.” Her tone carried no alarm, just observation, but they gave the formation a wide berth all the same.

By late afternoon they reached the far side of the valley and began the long, grueling ascent toward the final pass. The slope was narrower here, hemmed in by black cliffs streaked with ice. Above them, the sky was a pale wash of gold, the sun preparing to vanish behind the peaks. The air felt thinner still, each breath a conscious effort. They spoke only when necessary, saving their strength for the climb.

Near the top of the pass, Indra called a halt. She stood on a narrow ledge, eyes fixed ahead. “There,” she said, pointing. Between two distant peaks, just visible through a break in the clouds, a smear of smoke rose into the sky. It was faint, but it carried the promise of hearth fires and human habitation.

“Albardack,” Gundur said, his voice low but certain.

No one argued. They all saw it. The sight settled in them like a spark in dry tinder, warming them against the cold. With renewed energy, they pushed on, the last stretch of the climb ahead. By the time they reached the crest, the sun was gone, leaving only the pale glow of twilight to light their way. They would camp one final night in the high country before the descent. And tomorrow, Albardack would no longer be just a name.

Dawn rose slowly, spilling pale light over the jagged rim of the pass and washing the snow in shades of silver and blue. The cold had hardened everything—the ropes were stiff, the tent fabric brittle, and their breath left quick-fading clouds in the still air. No wind reached them

here, as if the mountain itself was pausing to watch them leave. They broke camp in silence, each lost in private thoughts, and began the descent toward Albardack.

The path wound down in long, treacherous switchbacks carved by centuries of wind and meltwater. Here and there, the ice had melted into slick, glassy sheets that reflected the morning light, forcing them to move carefully, every step deliberate. Gundur went first, testing the ground with the toe of his boot before committing his full weight, his shield slung across his back. Squeek shifted occasionally under his collar, as if aware that home—or at least warmth—was drawing closer.

Cyra followed, his staff planted firmly with each step. The descent freed his mind from the single-minded grind of the climb, and his gaze kept drifting to the horizon. He didn't speak, but his eyes held that calculating glint, as though he were already measuring Albardack for its secrets. Ardan walked beside him when the path widened, her expression unreadable, though now and then her gaze flickered ahead toward the rising plume of smoke. She carried herself as if she had already arrived and was simply waiting for the rest of the world to catch up.

Indra ranged ahead when she could, moving to scout the bends in the trail. Her bow was unstrung for the first time in days, but her hands never strayed far from the quiver at her side. She had grown quieter the closer they came to the town, her focus sharpening, the kind of focus she reserved for the final moments of a hunt. Korin took the rear, his eyes alternating between their back trail and the narrow ribbon of valley unfolding ahead. He still felt the weight of the mountains behind them, and until Albardack's gates were in reach, he would not relax.

By midday, they passed through a gap between two black cliffs where the sun struck full, blinding them briefly before revealing the world below. The valley opened wide, dotted with dark pines whose snow-laden branches bent under their own weight. A river wound through it like a thread of steel, its surface broken by patches of ice. And there, tucked against the base of the far hills, sprawled Albardack—a cluster of stone buildings, smoke curling from chimneys, the faint glint of sunlight off slate roofs. Even from this distance, they could see the town's wall, sturdy and gray, a reminder that this was a place that had learned to guard itself.

They stopped without speaking, the sight holding them for a long moment. Gundur's mouth twitched in what might have been the beginning of a smile. "There it is," he said. "A roof, a fire, and ale worth the coin."

"Don't get sentimental," Cyra replied, though his voice lacked its usual edge.

Ardan's eyes lingered on the walls. "We'll see what Albardack offers. And what it hides."

Indra only said, "It's closer than the mountain."

Korin shifted the strap of his pack. "Closer still if we keep moving."

They descended the rest of the trail with renewed pace, the thought of a warm hearth spurring them on. The snow thinned as they dropped lower, replaced by patches of frozen earth and the muted crunch of pine needles underfoot. The air grew heavier, warmer by degrees, carrying with it the distant scent of woodsmoke and something else—bread, maybe, or roasting meat. The sounds of the mountain gave way to the faint murmur of life from the valley below: a distant bark, the creak of a wagon wheel, the soft toll of a bell.

By the time the sun dipped toward the horizon, they were within sight of Albardack's gate. The town lay in the shadow of the hills, its stone walls sturdy against the fading light. A pair of guards stood at the entrance, their breath puffing white in the cold air. Beyond, the glow of lanterns promised warmth and company. The journey over the mountains was behind them, but none of them mistook the gate for an ending. It was simply the beginning of whatever lay ahead.

Gundur adjusted his grip on his pack and glanced at the others. "Let's go," he said. "We didn't cross those peaks just to stand here."

And together, with the mountain at their backs and Albardack before them, they stepped toward the gate.

Albardack

The gate of Albardack was a simple wooden arch, its timbers thick with frost and carved with the faint traces of warding runes worn down by decades of wind and snow. Beyond it, the town spread in a loose knot of buildings along the valley floor, their roofs sagging under the weight of winter. Smoke curled from chimneys into the pale sky, and the air carried the mingled scents of burning pine, tanned leather, and the faint metallic tang of worked iron. A single muddy street—hard-frozen this time of year—ran through the center, branching into narrow lanes that wound between clusters of homes.

Most of the houses were timber-framed, their planks weathered to a silvery gray, though here and there a squat stone dwelling stood like a stubborn relic from an earlier age. Wooden shutters rattled in the wind, and every home bore the small details of people who had adapted to long winters: stacks of firewood under awnings, racks of drying herbs hung by the door, and sledges leaned against walls. In the center of the town stood three stone wells, their rims capped with thick lids to keep the water from freezing solid. A little to the east was a cluster of larger buildings: the guard post with its watchtower no higher than the pines around it, the Imbol tavern with its brightly painted sign of a foaming mug, and the general trader's shop with a window displaying a curious mix of furs, candles, rope, and a scattering of tin cooking pots. The blacksmith's forge smoked steadily nearby, the rhythmic ring of hammer on anvil carrying faintly through the cold air.

The people of Albardack were dressed in thick woolens and patched leather, their faces wind-chapped but generally cheerful. Most were farmers or trappers, some tending to sheep in low

sheds on the outskirts, others carrying bundles of pelts to the fur trader's workshop. Children darted across the main street with snowballs, their laughter sharp in the cold, while an elderly man in a fur cap shuffled past with a cart of split logs. The sound of life here was quiet but steady, like the murmur of a hearth fire: doors opening and closing, the creak of harnesses, voices calling greetings that were brief but warm.

The party crossed into town without fuss, drawing a few curious glances—outsiders were not rare in Albardack, but they were worth noting. Gundur's armor and weapons drew the eyes of a couple of guards, who gave him a polite nod but didn't stop him. Indra caught the gaze of a tall, wiry trapper leaning against the trader's shop, who returned her look with the kind of slow nod that was not exactly a greeting, more an acknowledgment of shared alertness.

The Imbol tavern's door was heavy oak, its hinges groaning as Gundur pushed it open. Heat rolled out at them, thick with the smell of roasting meat and spiced ale. Inside, the main room was lit by a fire roaring in a stone hearth that took up nearly an entire wall. Rough-hewn tables filled the space, most of them occupied by locals in various stages of eating, drinking, or arguing over a game of cards. A plump woman with red cheeks and a quick smile bustled between the tables with trays, and from behind the bar a tall man with a neat gray beard gave them a measuring look before his face broke into a welcoming grin.

"Travelers," he said, setting down the tankard he'd been drying. "Welcome to the Imbol. I'm Halric, and I keep the fires burning and the mugs full. You'll be wanting rooms, aye?"

"That, and something hot to eat," Gundur replied, stepping forward.

Halric nodded. "We've stew, fresh bread, and a keg of the winter ale that'll put life back in your bones. Rooms are two silver a night, meals extra."

Cyra slid a few coins onto the bar without hesitation. "We'll take three rooms. And baths, if you've got them."

At that, Halric's grin widened. "Baths we've got. Old Trenna runs the washroom—she'll see you taken care of." He raised his voice toward the kitchen. "Trenna! Three for the tubs!"

A moment later, a woman in her late forties with sharp eyes and a practical braid appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. "This the lot?" she asked, looking over Gundur, Cyra, and Korin. "Come on, then. Water's hot, but don't dawdle unless you're paying extra."

The washroom was a long, warm space with steam rising from three wooden tubs already filled. The men eased themselves into the heat with groans of relief. Trenna lingered nearby, making small talk in a voice that was pleasant enough but edged with the seasoned bluntness of someone who had seen her share of road-weary travelers.

"You've come over the mountains, haven't you?" she said, setting fresh towels within reach. "Not many do that this time of year. Unless they've got business worth risking frostbite for."

"Business," Korin said with a faint smile. "And stubbornness."

“Always a dangerous mix,” Trenna replied, her eyes glinting with mischief. She leaned against the wall, her tone turning suggestive. “If any of you need a bit of extra warmth tonight, I’ve ways of helping. Nothing like a friendly touch to chase the cold from your bones.”

Gundur chuckled but shook his head. “Appreciate the offer, lass. But the ale will do me fine.”

Cyra’s mouth twitched in the barest suggestion of a smile. “And I’ll settle for the bath.”

Korin inclined his head politely. “Generous of you. But we’ve had enough adventure for one week.”

Trenna laughed, unoffended. “Suit yourselves. I’ll leave you to soak. Shout if you need more hot water.” She left them to the steam and the quiet, the door closing behind her.

When the baths were done and the warmth had seeped into their muscles, they rejoined Indra and Ardan in the main room. Platters of stew and bread were waiting, along with mugs of the promised winter ale. They ate and drank, the conversation flowing easily now that the journey’s edge had dulled. Laughter came more readily, even from Cyra, and Gundur told a short, gruff tale about a sergeant in Hammerfast Reach who once made an entire company march backwards through a snowstorm to teach them “respect for the wind.”

By the time the fire had burned low, they were ready for sleep, their beds soft enough to make the thought of another mountain crossing seem like a problem for another life.

The next morning, they would step back into Albardack’s streets—first to the trader’s shop, and then, unknowingly, toward a fortune-teller with a keen eye for future.

Morning in Albardack arrived gently, the light filtered through a soft veil of frost that clung to every roof and window. The air outside was crisp and clean, the kind that seemed to clear the mind as much as the lungs. A few early risers were already moving about: a farmer leading two bleating goats toward the well, a pair of children chasing each other between snowbanks with sticks in hand, and a smith’s apprentice sweeping the fresh dusting of snow from the stones in front of the forge. The town carried itself with the slow, steady rhythm of people who knew the value of each day’s work.

The party made their way toward the trader’s shop, a squat timber building with a wide front window and a carved wooden sign that simply read “Jarek’s.” Inside, the air was warm and faintly scented with leather and beeswax. The walls were lined with shelves of goods: stacks of candles wrapped in twine, bundles of rope, neatly folded wool blankets, jars of preserves, racks of fishing hooks, and a glass case displaying an assortment of daggers, tools, and trinkets. Jarek himself was behind the counter—a broad man with a neatly trimmed beard and a vest over his wool shirt, his hands busy tallying a ledger. He looked up as they entered and offered a welcoming nod.

“Morning, travelers. You’ll be needing supplies after coming over the peaks, I reckon.”

“Food rations,” Gundur said without preamble. “And candles. Enough to last a few weeks.”

“Got both,” Jarek replied, moving to a side shelf. He began stacking wax-wrapped bundles on the counter. “Five days of dried meat and hard bread in each ration, plus a handful of dried apples for good measure. And the candles are tallow, long-burning. You’ll not get finer in Albardack unless you make ’em yourself.”

Cyra, idly browsing along one of the shelves, picked up a small brass compass. “Accurate?” he asked.

Jarek shrugged. “Points north most of the time. But in the hills, the stone can play tricks on it.”

“Then it’s useless,” Cyra muttered, setting it back down. His gaze moved to a polished magnifying glass in a leather case. “Now that might be worth something.”

Meanwhile, Korin had found a rack of small, corked vials. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Herbal tinctures,” Jarek said. “Mostly for coughs and fever, but that one there’s for stomach trouble. Brought in by a trapper who swears it’s saved him from bad meat more than once.”

Gundur snorted. “Bad meat’s its own lesson. Eat it once, you’ll never do it again.”

Indra was by the window, examining a neatly wrapped bundle of fletching feathers. “Crow feathers?” she asked.

“Raven,” Jarek corrected. “Straight and strong. They hold true even in high wind.”

Ardan moved closer to the counter, setting a hand on the rations Gundur had chosen. “We’ll take these and the candles,” she said. “And perhaps that magnifying glass Cyra was eyeing.”

Cyra gave a faint smile. “Practical at last.”

Jarek tallied the cost, coins exchanged hands, and the party left with their packs a little heavier. Outside, the main street had grown livelier: a cart laden with firewood creaked toward the tavern, and two men in heavy coats were arguing good-naturedly about the weight of a bear pelt one of them had draped over his shoulder.

It was Ardan who suggested their next stop. “There’s a woman here—Mirda. They say she’s a great fortune-teller. Reads the stars and the soul. We have time to indulge a curiosity.”

Cyra raised an eyebrow. “I’m certain she reads the contents of your coin purse first.”

“All the same,” Ardan replied with a calm smile, “I’d like to see what she says.”

The others exchanged glances. Gundur muttered something about “witchy nonsense,” but no one argued. And so, with the sun high enough to warm their shoulders just slightly, they turned down a narrow lane toward the outskirts of Albardack, where Mirda’s hut stood like a dark knot in the pale winter landscape.

Mirda’s hut sat at the very edge of Albardack, where the snowdrifts grew deeper and the houses gave way to open fields rimmed by forest. The structure was small, round-roofed, and

built of dark, weather-stained planks. A crooked chimney belched a thin trail of smoke that smelled faintly of herbs and something bitter. Hanging from the eaves were bundles of dried plants, talismans made of twigs tied with red thread, and a collection of bones strung into a wind chime that clattered softly in the breeze.

Ardan approached first, knocking lightly on the warped wooden door. After a pause, it creaked open to reveal an old woman swathed in black from head to toe. Her eyes were sharp and pale, her skin lined like old parchment, and a heavy scarf wound around her hair gave her a silhouette that was more shadow than figure. Behind her, a black cat arched its back and hissed, yellow eyes glinting in the dimness.

“You’ve come for the knowing,” Mirda said, her voice low and gravelly. “Come in, come in, before the cold takes your bones.”

Inside, the hut was dim and close, the air thick with the scent of dried sage and damp wood. A small fire crackled in a stone hearth, and on the central table sat a large glass sphere that caught the light from the flames and seemed to swallow it whole. Mirda waved them to sit on low stools arranged around the table. The cat hopped up onto a shelf and continued to glare at them as though daring anyone to reach out a hand.

“Tea,” Mirda announced, shuffling to the hearth. She poured a thick green liquid from a blackened kettle into mismatched clay cups. The steam that rose from it was pungent and not entirely pleasant. “Drink, and the threads of fate will loosen for my eyes.”

Cyra sniffed at his cup but took a cautious sip. His face remained impassive, though Gundur grimaced openly. Korin took a slow swallow and muttered, “Tastes like someone boiled moss and regrets.”

Mirda seated herself opposite them, placing both hands on the glass sphere. She began to rub it in slow, deliberate circles, her eyes half-lidded. “I see… I see journeys,” she murmured. “Long roads and steep climbs. There is danger ahead, but also… pies. Yes, a feast will come to you soon.”

Gundur’s brow furrowed. “Pies?”

“Yes,” Mirda said solemnly. “Round, golden, and filled with meat. They will be very important to your destiny.”

Indra glanced at Ardan, who hid a smile behind her hand.

“Now you,” Mirda said, turning her gaze to Cyra. “Ah… I see fire in your past. And in your future. Many flames, some you lit yourself, some that found you. Beware the cold hands of the envious—yes, they will try to take what you have.”

Cyra’s only reply was a slow blink.

She moved to Korin next. “You walk with shadows, boy. You collect names in your heart like other men collect coins. There is one name you will not speak aloud, and it will follow you until you do.”

Korin raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

To Indra, she said, “The wind loves you. But it may carry you too far one day. Beware the call of the open horizon.”

And finally to Ardan: “You, child, you have threads wrapped around your fingers. Many threads. You will cut some, tie others, but one thread you think you hold will turn out to be holding you.”

When she was finished, Mirda released the sphere and leaned back, clearly satisfied. The cat leapt down from its shelf and landed silently beside her chair.

“Your readings are… unusual,” Ardan said diplomatically.

“Truth is never simple,” Mirda replied, sipping her tea. Then she set her cup down with a little sigh. “Speaking of truth—my sister Lida lives at the other end of town. She is ninety-five, alone, and too old to climb the stairs to her bed without help. The weather keeps me from visiting her often. Would you… as kindly folk… go and lend her a hand? She needs food brought to her, and a bit of lifting. You’d be doing a great kindness.”

The “kindly folk” part earned a small snort from Gundur, but before anyone could refuse, Mirda launched into a long, winding plea that mixed tales of her sister’s fragility with pointed comments about how healthy and strong the party looked.

It was Ardan who finally cut in. “We’ll go,” she said. “We can spare the time.”

Mirda’s pale eyes lit up. “Bless you. She will reward you. Tell her I sent you.”

And so they left the dim warmth of the hut, the black cat’s glare following them out the door, and turned their steps back toward the center of Albardack to find Lida’s home.

Lida’s house turned out to be a modest, two-story wooden dwelling tucked into a quieter lane on the far side of Albardack. Snow had drifted high against its walls, and a neat path had been cleared from the door to the street. The scent of woodsmoke lingered in the air, mingled with something faintly sweet—perhaps the remains of a baked loaf cooling somewhere inside. Gundur knocked, and after a moment the door creaked open to reveal a small, bent woman with a crown of white hair and eyes as bright as winter sunlight. She leaned heavily on a carved walking stick, but her smile was warm.

“You must be the ones Mirda sent,” she said in a voice surprisingly clear for her age. “Come in, dears, come in. The cold’s not fit for standing about.”

The interior was tidy and warm, a fire burning in the hearth and shelves lined with neatly arranged jars and folded linens. A narrow staircase wound upward, the kind that would be

difficult for someone her age to manage. Lida gestured toward it. “If you’d be so kind, my bed is upstairs. I’ve been sleeping by the fire lately, but I miss the comfort of my own blankets. And… there’s a loaf on the table. Would you bring that too? Makes the climb worth it.”

Gundur moved to her side without hesitation, his arm bracing her gently as they approached the stairs. “We’ll take it slow,” he said. “No rush.”

She chuckled. “I’ve been climbing stairs longer than you’ve been alive, young man. But I’ll take the help.”

Cyra fetched the loaf—dark-crusted and still fragrant—while Korin moved ahead to be sure the upper room was warm enough. The bedroom was small but inviting, with thick quilts and a low window that looked out over the snowy street. Gundur and Korin guided Lida up each step carefully until she was seated on the edge of the bed, the climb leaving her breathing a little faster but still smiling.

“There now,” she said, settling against the pillows. “Much better than the floor. And as promised—” She pointed to a small dresser by the bed. “Top drawer. There’s twenty silver there. I can’t have good folk going unrewarded.”

Korin opened the drawer and found a small pouch, the coins inside clinking softly. “We’ll put it to good use,” he said, tying it shut.

Lida accepted a slice of her bread and took a bite, sighing contentedly. “You’ve done me a kindness today. Mirda’s heart is good, but her head’s always full of other things. She forgets how heavy the stairs can feel when the years add up.”

Gundur allowed himself a small grin. “Consider it part of our training. You’re lighter than my pack.”

Lida laughed, her eyes crinkling. “Then you must eat more. Can’t have you wasting away.”

They stayed with her a little longer, listening to her speak about her younger days—how Albardack had once been nothing but a handful of houses and a trading post, how the winters used to be harsher but the game more plentiful. She told them about her husband, gone many years now, and her pride in her children and grandchildren scattered across the valleys.

When they finally left, the lane outside felt a little warmer despite the snow. The next stop would be the fur trader’s, and Gundur remarked as they walked, “If they’ve got linings for my armor that don’t make me itch, I’ll pay twice what they ask.”

“Let’s hope they’ve got something for my hands,” Indra added. “Cold fingers make for poor shooting.”

“And maybe,” Korin said, glancing at Cyra, “they have something that works better than the moss tea we drank this morning.”

“That,” Cyra said dryly, “would be a true miracle.”

They followed the sound of hammering hides toward the smell of tanned leather, ready to see what Albardack’s trappers had to offer.

The fur trader’s workshop stood near the edge of town, where the wind could carry away the heavier smells of tanning and curing. The building was long and low, its walls hung with drying pelts—wolf, fox, hare, and even the thick white fur of mountain goats. Inside, the air was warm from a central stove, and the scent of leather oil and smoke wrapped around them like a heavy cloak. Bundles of fur were stacked neatly along the walls, some already cut and sewn into linings, mittens, or boot wraps.

Behind a counter piled with tools and scraps, a bearded man with arms like tree trunks was busy trimming the edge of a bear hide. He looked up as they entered and gave a short nod. “Welcome. I’m Darrin. You’re the travelers who came over the peaks, aren’t you? Word travels fast in Albardack.”

“That’s us,” Gundur said, stepping forward to run his hand over a length of fox fur. “We need linings for armor—necks, hands, feet, and backs. It gets cold up there.”

Darrin grunted. “Cold’s half the problem. Cold with damp will kill you quicker. Let’s see what I’ve got.” He came out from behind the counter, leading them to a rack where long strips of supple fur hung in neat rows. “Goat for warmth, fox for softness, wolf for a bit of both. The wolf’s thicker—better for armor lining.”

Cyra brushed his fingers along a strip of wolf pelt. “How long will these last in mountain conditions?”

“With care? A few winters,” Darrin said. “Oil the leather side and keep them dry. Don’t store them too close to fire—heat cracks them.”

While Darrin fetched his tools to make measurements, two other men entered from the back of the shop. Both were trappers, lean and wiry, their coats patched with mismatched fur. One carried a bundle of fresh pelts, the other a sack that clinked faintly with steel traps. They greeted Darrin and gave the party a curious look before hanging up their catches.

“You the ones crossed over from the west?” one of them asked. His voice had the gravel of long days in the wind.

“That’s right,” Korin replied. “Heard much about those peaks?”

The trapper nodded slowly. “Enough. Strange country up there. Last winter, I tracked a bear bigger than any I’d seen before. Prints as wide as my chest. Followed them for two days. On the third, they just… stopped. Like it vanished into the air.”

The other trapper snorted. “Tell them about the wolves instead. That’s a story worth telling.”

“Mm,” the first agreed. “Two winters back, me and Jorrel were hunting near the icefields. Heard howling—nothing unusual—’til we saw them. Six of ’em. All white, eyes like moonlight. Didn’t act like normal wolves. They circled us for hours, always staying just far enough away. When night came, they were gone. No tracks in the snow where they’d stood.”

Gundur’s brow furrowed. “Ghost wolves?”

“Maybe,” the trapper said with a shrug. “Or maybe the mountain doesn’t like to be understood.”

Darrin returned then, rolling out the furs he’d cut to size. “Here you go. Lined to fit under your armor, won’t bunch at the joints. And for your hands—wolf-fur mitts. Good grip, warm even when damp.”

They tested each piece, the warmth immediate and welcome. Payment was exchanged, and Darrin wrapped the rest of their purchases in oilcloth.

Outside, the sky had grown a little grayer, the promise of snow hanging in the air. The street was lively with folk carrying baskets, hauling sledges of firewood, and tending to animals in the pens along the road. The party lingered for a moment, watching life in Albardack move at its steady pace, before deciding to walk through the market lane and see who else they might meet.

The market lane of Albardack was little more than a widened stretch of the main street, but in the heart of winter it was still busy enough to keep the air humming with chatter. A few wooden stalls stood under canvas awnings, their edges heavy with frost. Most of the goods were practical—sacks of grain, bundles of firewood, smoked meats, skeins of yarn dyed in muted reds and blues. The smells of pine pitch and roasting chestnuts mingled in the cold air.

A tall woman in a sheepskin coat waved them over to her stall, where neat rows of pottery gleamed in the pale light. “Travelers! Come see my wares. Clay from the riverbed down in Glenbarrow, shaped by my own hands. Strong enough to take a fall from the table and still hold your stew.”

Gundur picked up a wide-bellied mug, turning it over in his hand. “Feels solid,” he admitted. “What’s your name?”

“Merla,” she said with a smile. “My father taught me the craft. The clay here’s fine-grained—fires well even in the colder months. You’d be surprised how many mugs I sell to the tavern each winter. Folk break them when they get into their ale.”

Cyra, half-smiling, set down a small glazed plate. “Seems an expensive way to measure a night’s drinking.”

“Maybe,” Merla said, “but it keeps me in business.”

A little further on, they met an older man named Brann, who was selling woven woolen scarves from a bench. His hands were thick and knotted, but the weave of his goods was tight

and even. “Made these myself,” he told them. “Sheep up in the hills grow a thick, greasy wool—warmest you’ll find. Had to fight the rams for it, though.”

Indra selected a deep green scarf and wrapped it around her neck without comment, though the faintest curve touched her mouth.

Past Brann’s bench stood a woman with a cage of hens, their feathers puffed against the cold. She was chatting with a man who had a sack of oats over his shoulder, both of them breaking into laughter at some shared joke. Korin paused long enough to buy a small bundle of dried herbs from her—mint and chamomile for tea—and she thanked him with a grin.

It was these small exchanges that began to stitch the party into the fabric of the town. A passing blacksmith’s apprentice waved after recognizing them from the tavern the night before. A pair of children paused in their snowball fight to stare, then resumed with a volley aimed not at each other but at Gundur’s boots. He pretended not to notice, which made them giggle all the harder.

As they reached the far end of the lane, Ardan slowed her steps, glancing toward the tavern’s sign swaying gently in the wind. “A warm table and a pot of stew would be welcome,” she said.

“No arguments here,” Gundur replied. “And maybe a mug or two of that winter ale.”

So they returned to the Imbol, where Halric greeted them like old friends. The common room was busy, but he found them a table near the fire. Before long, platters of roasted venison, thick bread, and mugs of ale crowded the table. The warmth seeped into them again, and conversation turned easy.

That night, as snow began to fall outside, they stayed until the fire burned low, trading quiet stories with a shepherd named Torvin about wolves in the high pastures and the stubbornness of mountain sheep. By the time they finally climbed the stairs to their rooms, the street below was blanketed in fresh white, the sounds of the town settling into the slow, steady heartbeat of winter.

The next morning dawned bright, sunlight glancing off the snow so sharply it seemed to set the whole town aglow. The roofs glittered, icicles hanging like crystal knives from the eaves, and the air carried the faint tang of woodsmoke. The Imbol tavern stirred slowly; Halric was wiping down the tables while Trenna bustled in from the kitchen with trays of steaming porridge and fried eggs for the early risers.

The party ate leisurely, watching the rhythm of Albardack’s day begin through the frost-framed windows. Farmers drove small sledges loaded with hay toward the animal pens, the town’s pair of guards patrolled with lazy confidence, and a few hardy souls were already hauling buckets from the central well.

With no pressing quest or danger at hand, their days fell into an easy pattern. In the mornings they roamed the town or helped with small chores for the folk they had met. Gundur spent

one afternoon at Darrin's workshop, curious about the way the man prepared hides for winter armor. Cyra visited Jarek's shop again to browse through a crate of secondhand books and maps—most of which turned out to be outdated, though he still bought a worn leather-bound volume on mountain weather lore.

Korin found himself talking often with Brann, the old scarf-seller, who liked to sit by the well when the sun was out. The old man had a gift for long stories, and one day he told of a winter, thirty years past, when an avalanche had sealed Albardack's northern pass. "We thought we'd be cut off for the whole season," Brann said, stroking his beard, "but one week later a stranger walked in from the snow, carrying nothing but a sack of pinecones. Stayed two nights, left before dawn, never said his name. Still don't know where he came from."

Indra spent time among the trappers, quietly listening to their talk. She heard tales of foxes that lured hounds into the river ice, of a hare so large it was mistaken for a deer until it vanished between snow-laden trees. The hunters told these stories with the matter-of-fact tone of people who had learned that truth and legend often walked side by side in the mountains.

Evenings at the tavern became a ritual. They took the same table near the fire, and Halric began setting aside their preferred ale without asking. Locals would drift over, sharing news or simply curious to talk with people from beyond the peaks. One young man, barely out of boyhood, shyly asked Indra if she would teach him how to fletch an arrow properly. She agreed, and by the end of the week he was proudly showing his neatly feathered shafts to anyone who would listen.

Life in Albardack moved slowly but with purpose. There were no grand events, only the steady pulse of daily work—wood to split, traps to check, roofs to mend before the next heavy snow. The party found themselves folding into that rhythm, their presence no longer that of strangers but of neighbors. The days passed easily, the memory of the cold mountain crossing growing more distant as the warmth of hearth and company took its place.

By the second week, Albardack had begun to feel less like a stopover and more like a place with roots waiting to take hold. The townsfolk greeted them by name now. Gundur could hardly walk down the main street without someone calling him over to lift a sack of grain or help shift a stubborn cart from a frozen rut. Cyra, despite his aloof manner, had been drawn into long talks with a schoolteacher named Elen about the oddities of local dialects and the changes in star patterns during winter.

One crisp afternoon, Korin helped a pair of shepherds repair a section of fence on the outskirts. As they worked, one of the shepherds, a broad man named Hadrik, began telling a story in a low voice. "Happened when I was a boy," he said. "We had a winter so cold the river froze to the bed. Wolves came down from the ridges, but not like the usual packs. These… they watched from the tree line for three days. Never came closer. Then one night, the moon turned red and they were gone. Next morning, not a track to be found."

Korin listened without comment, filing the tale away. He had learned that the people here spoke of such things not as superstition, but as part of the land itself.

Indra spent that day with Torvin the shepherd, walking the high pastures where the snow lay wind-scoured and thin. She learned where the flock liked to shelter when storms rolled in, and Torvin spoke of springs hidden under ice, the kind only locals knew to find. “Outsiders get caught without water, even in the snow,” he said, stamping a patch of crust to reveal a trickle of cold, clear liquid.

Evenings continued to draw them to the Imbol. On this night, the tavern was unusually busy; a caravan had come in from the south, bringing with it bolts of cloth, barrels of dried fruit, and a group of travelers eager for drink. The room was alive with talk and the clink of mugs.

A stout man named Varric, one of the caravan hands, struck up a conversation with Gundur. “You ever hear of the Hollow Pass?” he asked over his mug. “It’s north of here, beyond the white pines. They say in winter you can hear music in the wind there. Like pipes, or singing. No one’s sure if it’s the ice, or… something else.”

Gundur shrugged. “If it’s music, it’s not for me. But I’ll drink to your story.”

At the far end of the table, Cyra was in a wry debate with one of the caravan merchants about whether the “firestones” in her pack were true volcanic glass or just polished river rock. Ardan listened, faint amusement on her face, occasionally nudging the conversation toward bets the merchant wisely declined.

By the time the caravan group had retired to their rented rooms, the tavern’s fire was burning low. Outside, the snow had begun again—soft flakes drifting down, settling quietly over Albardack. The party lingered at their table, the warmth and easy hum of voices around them creating a feeling that the mountains beyond were farther away than they truly were.

The following days slipped by in a comfortable rhythm. Snow came and went in soft falls, covering the rooftops in clean white before melting just enough to expose the wood and stone again. The market lane still bustled, though the stalls offered more preserved goods than fresh ones. Life in Albardack had settled into the kind of winter pace where each day felt both quiet and full—small tasks, long conversations, and a steady undercurrent of community.

One morning, Halric waved them over to the bar before they had even found their table. “You lot have been here long enough to be part of the town’s nonsense,” he said with a grin. “We’ve a snow carving contest in two days. Everyone’s welcome. Prizes are… mostly bragging rights, but there’s a decent ham for the winner.”

Gundur grunted. “I’m no carver. But I can pile snow with the best of them.”

“Could always make a giant wolf,” Indra suggested, the corner of her mouth twitching. “Give the trappers something to talk about.”

Korin simply said, “If we join, we’ll need tools. And gloves that can stand a few hours in the cold.”

Cyra rolled his eyes. “Or we could simply watch.”

But by the afternoon, the group had agreed to participate—if only to avoid standing out by avoiding it. They spent the next day asking townsfolk about past contests. Brann the scarf-seller swore the best sculpture he’d ever seen was a dragon that looked ready to leap off its snow pedestal, though he admitted it collapsed before judging. Merla, the potter, claimed the key was to start small and avoid “ambition larger than the weather allows.”

In between these casual errands, Ardan convinced them to visit Jarek’s shop yet again. She claimed they needed more candles, but once inside she was browsing the shelves with sharp eyes. “You never know what turns up here,” she murmured, picking up a small brass key of unknown origin and turning it over.

Jarek leaned on the counter. “That one? Been in my drawer for years. Might fit a lock in town, might fit one halfway across the world. No one’s claimed it.”

Cyra gave Ardan a sidelong glance. “You’re buying a mystery.”

“Not buying,” she said, setting it down again. “Just remembering it’s here.”

Later, as the sky dimmed, they returned to the Imbol where Halric had set up a pot of mulled cider. The air in the tavern was thick with the scent of cloves and oranges. That night they found themselves in long conversation with Varric from the caravan again. He spoke of southern roads where the snow never touched the ground, of trade towns along the coast where ships the size of fortresses came and went with the tide.

By the time they retired, the contest day was nearly upon them. And though none of them would say it aloud, there was a sense that their time in Albardack—this long, easy pause between journeys—was beginning to gather an ending somewhere on the horizon.

The day of the snow carving contest dawned bright and windless, a rare gift in Albardack’s winter. The whole town seemed to gather along the market lane, where lumps of snow had been rolled and piled into the beginnings of strange shapes—foxes, bears, snow fortresses, and one ambitious attempt at a sailing ship. The party claimed a spot near the central well and began work on a rough, blocky figure that was meant to be a mountain goat but quickly took on a more fantastical form under Gundur’s broad hands and Indra’s precise shaping. Cyra contributed by making occasional remarks about symmetry, which everyone ignored, and Korin focused on refining the creature’s curling horns.

Laughter and the chatter of neighbors filled the air. Children ran between the sculptors, cheeks red with cold, tossing snowballs at anyone foolish enough to turn their back. Brann passed by with mugs of hot cider, claiming it was “fuel for artistry,” while Merla offered them a strip of dried apple from her pocket. For a few hours, there was no thought of mountains, no memories of bitter wind—just the warmth of shared work and the soft glow of winter sunlight.

By late afternoon, the contest wound down. Halric and the town's two guards walked among the sculptures, making notes and offering exaggerated praise to even the most lopsided efforts. The party's horned goat-creature won second place, losing only to a perfectly shaped trout crafted by a quiet young woman who, it turned out, carved fish year-round from wood. They accepted their prize—a smoked ham—grinning, and set it on the tavern counter for Halric to serve later.

As the crowd began to disperse, the party lingered outside the Imbol, chatting with Torvin and watching the last of the sunlight bleed from the snow. The sky was a pale, cloudless blue, the kind that promised a sharp drop in temperature once the sun slipped away.

That was when a commotion began at the far end of the lane. Heads turned as a small figure stumbled into view—a boy, no more than ten, his face pale under streaks of dried blood. He clutched at his side, each step uneven, and then his knees buckled. He pitched forward into the snow, face-first, the white around him already staining red.

Indra reached him first, rolling him gently onto his back. His lips were blue, and his body shivered violently. "He's freezing," she said sharply. Gundur lifted him without a word, and they hurried into the tavern. Inside, the heat hit them like a wave. Halric was already clearing a bench near the fire, and someone ran for a blanket.

The boy's eyes fluttered open as they wrapped him in wool, his teeth chattering so hard he could barely speak. The crowd pressed in, their voices hushed with worry.

"What happened?" Korin asked softly, crouching beside him.

The boy swallowed hard, voice trembling. "We… we were playing. Me, Larrin, Tova, and Briss… by the frozen creek. The one past the old pines. Then it came. Big… bigger than a bear. Jaws… like a beetle. It grabbed them—dragged them off—up toward the mountains."

A gasp rippled through the gathered townsfolk. Someone shouted for the boy's mother, and moments later a woman burst through the crowd. She dropped to her knees beside him, clutching his face with shaking hands. "My boy! Oh gods—where are the others? Where are they?" Her voice broke into sobs, and she swayed, half-falling into the arms of a neighbor.

Others were calling names now—parents of the missing children, voices tight with fear. Some were crying openly, others pacing in frantic circles. The boy's wounds were quickly tended with clean cloth and warm broth, but his words had cast a shadow over the room.

Halric turned to the party, his expression grim. "You've crossed the mountains. You know their ways better than any of us here. If those children are to have a chance… we need you to bring them back."

The room fell silent but for the crackle of the fire and the boy's uneven breathing. One by one, the party members nodded, the weight of the task settling over them. The warmth of Albardack's hearth now felt like a thin shield against the cold, hungry wilderness waiting just beyond the town's edge.

And so, with the eyes of the town upon them, they accepted the charge: find the missing three children, and bring them home.

The next morning broke under a heavy sky, gray clouds hanging low over Albardack like a lid. The party left before most of the town was awake, packs heavy with rations, ropes, climbing spikes, and extra furs from Darrin's shop. The boy's words still hung in their minds, vivid and urgent, pulling them toward the frozen creek beyond the old pines. Snow squeaked under their boots in the cold, dry air, each exhale drifting away as a thin cloud.

The outskirts of town soon gave way to open ground where the wind swept unhindered across drifts that reached up to their knees in places. Indra moved ahead, her eyes scanning the ground, the faint trail of small footprints quickly giving way to something larger—huge, misshapen prints that broke the crust of snow, each followed by a dark smear where something had been dragged. Bits of torn cloth and a single mitten lay half-buried in the white.

The creek lay frozen and still, its surface dusted with snow that masked the ice beneath. Blood was splashed across the frozen bank, already darkened to brown in the cold. Gundur's jaw tightened, but he said nothing, simply adjusting the strap of his greatsword and nodding to Indra to lead on. The tracks turned away from the creek, climbing into the slope that rose toward the foothills.

The wind grew sharper as they climbed, gusts rattling the bare branches of wind-scoured pines. They moved in single file along narrow deer trails, their boots slipping on icy patches hidden under snow. Once, Korin caught himself on a low branch when his foot went out from under him, the snow giving way to smooth stone beneath. He muttered a short prayer and kept moving.

Higher up, the land broke into ridges of jagged rock. They came to a chasm that split the path—a narrow but deep crevice in the mountainside where ice glinted along its walls. The wind sighed through it, carrying the faint echo of rushing water somewhere far below. Gundur tested the edge with his boot, then pulled a coil of rope from his pack.

"Anchor point there," he said, nodding toward a boulder across the gap. Korin swung the knotted rope, letting it arc over the crevice until it looped around the stone with a muffled thump. He hauled it tight, testing the knot twice before Gundur crossed, moving hand over hand, boots finding purchase on the icy lip of the gap. Korin followed, the rope creaking under his weight but holding firm.

Indra crossed next, quick and sure, barely glancing down into the shadowed depths below. Cyra went after, his staff tied across his back, face pale but steady.

Then it was Ardan's turn. She gripped the rope and began to move, her boots scraping for footholds. Halfway across, the boulder shifted slightly under the pull, loosening the knot. The rope sagged and twisted, sending a spray of ice chips into the darkness below. Ardan's feet slipped, one boot catching on the far edge as her body swung outward into the void.

“Hold!” Gundur barked, lunging forward to grab the rope. Indra was already braced at his side, her hands locking onto the line. Korin dropped to his knees, reaching out with one hand to catch Ardan’s arm as she swung toward him. The rope groaned, the knot straining, but together they hauled her back toward the ledge. Cyra caught her other arm, and with a final heave they pulled her onto the rock.

Ardan lay for a moment, breath ragged, snow clinging to her cloak. “That,” she said finally, “was closer than I’d prefer.”

Gundur retied the rope with a grunt. “Next time, double anchor.”

They rested briefly in the shelter of a jutting cliff before pushing on, the tracks leading them steadily higher into the mountains. The wind carried the scent of cold stone and old pine, and beneath it, something else—faint, metallic, almost like blood.

The ascent grew harsher with every step. The path narrowed to a frozen shelf of rock, the slope falling away sharply on one side into a valley glazed with ice. Indra led with careful steps, pausing often to test the ground ahead with the tip of her bow. The beast’s trail was clear here—broad prints pressed deep into the snow, each surrounded by disturbed patches where it had dragged its prey. Dark smears of frozen blood marked the path at irregular intervals, vivid against the white.

They crossed another treacherous stretch where the wind had carved shallow gullies between the rocks, forcing them to leap from one icy patch to another. Gundur anchored a rope so the others could swing across one at a time, their boots scraping for purchase on the slick stone. Korin’s landing sent a small avalanche of snow tumbling down into the hollow below, the sound echoing dully through the mountain air.

The cold bit deep into their fingers and toes despite the furs they wore. Cyra kept his staff close at hand, muttering short spells now and then to coax a flicker of warmth into his gloves. Ardan’s gaze never left the trail, her lips pressed thin, perhaps recalling the boy’s shaking voice in the tavern.

They stopped twice more to rest, huddling in shallow overhangs where the wind’s bite was dulled. Gundur passed around strips of dried meat, and Indra shared a flask of hot tea. No one spoke much; the climb demanded their breath, and the quiet between them was heavy with purpose.

As the afternoon light thinned, the terrain shifted again. The ridge they followed curved inward, funnelling them into a narrow cleft where the wind dropped away entirely. The stillness was unsettling after the constant howl higher up. Snow lay deep here, unmarked except for the same wide prints and long furrows that had led them from the creek.

And then they saw it: a dark mouth in the side of the mountain, half-hidden by an overhang of ice. Frost fringed the edges like teeth, and a faint draft whispered from within, carrying with it the unmistakable smell of something old and wrong. The snow in front of the entrance was churned and stained, the drag marks leading straight inside.

Gundur adjusted the strap of his greatsword and glanced at the others. “We’ve found it.”

The wind seemed to hold its breath around them as they stood before the cave, the weight of the mountains pressing in, and the darkness inside promising both answers and danger in equal measure.

The cave swallowed them in silence as they stepped inside, the daylight behind shrinking to a narrow slit of gray. The cold air here was heavier, tinged with the smell of damp stone and something rank beneath it, metallic and sweet all at once. Gundur struck flint to steel, the spark catching on a twist of dry fiber, and in moments a torch flared to life, its orange glow pushing back the darkness in trembling circles. Shadows leapt along the walls, warping the jagged rock into strange, crouching forms.

The floor sloped downward, narrowing into a long tunnel that seemed to breathe with the faint draft flowing from deeper within. Their boots crunched softly on gravel and ice, the sound muffled by the enclosing walls. The light from the torch painted wet streaks along the stone where water seeped through tiny cracks, glistening like black glass. Somewhere ahead, in the blind dark, a slow and irregular clicking echoed, sharp enough to make the hair on the back of Cyra’s neck stir.

They moved carefully, Indra leading with her bow half drawn, eyes sweeping the gloom for movement. Every few steps, the clicking would stop, replaced by a deep, hollow moaning that rolled through the stone like a voice too large for the tunnel. The sound slid cold along their spines, and Indra stiffened, the air catching in her throat. “It’s ahead,” she whispered, though she wasn’t sure whether she meant the sound or whatever made it.

As they descended further, the air grew warmer but thicker, heavy with a sour tang. The torchlight revealed dark stains across the floor, spattered in wide arcs, and deep grooves where something heavy had been dragged. Bits of torn cloth clung to the stone, frozen stiff, and once Korin stooped to lift a small, blood-stained mitten before setting it silently back down.

The tunnel forked twice, the party pausing each time to listen, choosing the path where the strange noises seemed stronger. The passage narrowed, forcing them into single file, the torchlight crowding close around them. Shadows shifted along the walls as if something unseen paced them just beyond the reach of light.

At last, the tunnel widened abruptly into a smaller cavern. The air here was warm enough to fog their breath, and the torchlight fell on shapes that froze them where they stood. Against one wall lay the mangled remains of two children, their small bodies torn and scattered, dark stains soaking the stone beneath. The smell was overpowering, copper and rot.

In the far corner, a boy huddled against the rock, his eyes wide and glassy with terror. He shivered violently, knees drawn to his chest, gaze fixed not on the party but on the thing that stood between them and him.

It was massive, two meters tall, with the broad, corded frame of a man but the glistening black wings of a dragonfly arching high above its back. Its head was the smooth, chitinous dome of a scarab, mandibles clicking wetly, the sound echoing in the cavern they had heard since entering. Powerful jaws flexed as it turned toward them, the torchlight sliding over its armored carapace in cold gleams. The air around it seemed to vibrate, an alien hum that sank into the bone.

The party stood in the trembling glow of the torch, the beast’s shadow stretching long toward them across the blood-slick floor.

The Cliffrazor Scarabs are a savage and ancient breed of towering carnivorous beetles that have evolved along the sheer ridgelines and crumbling heights of canyons, volcanic cliffs, and wind-shorn mountains. Believed by some to be the remnants of a long-dead insect god's warriors, these towering beetles measure over 2 meters in height, with bulbous, plated carapaces, and powerful mandibles capable of piercing metal.

Unlike their smaller kin, these scarabs are entirely carnivorous. They hunt from above, often embedding themselves silently into cliff walls or hanging inverted from jutting rock. Their strong wings launch them into the air, and with a shrieking buzz they dive — biting, tearing, and slamming their prey with unstoppable force.

Their chitin armor, often dark blue, burnt orange, or obsidian black, reflects sunlight like polished glass and is nearly impervious to primitive weapons. These carapaces crack only under forceful magical attacks or precision strikes — giving rise to legends of swords shattering against their backs.

Cliffrazor Scarabs live in small territorial groupings, each scarab staking out ledges and overhangs from which it hunts. They do not build nests, but often litter their cliffsides with bones and half-eaten remains, creating visceral warning signs for other predators or adventurers.

Their burrows are dug into the rock face with powerful mandibles and can stretch inward dozens of feet, often lined with the resin of digested bone. These tunnels serve as resting places and egg-laying chambers.

They are aggressive, silent, and solitary, though during mating seasons, two scarabs may circle one another in midair, locking mandibles in a spiraling dive that either results in death or a short-lived bond.

The Cliffrazor Scarab's chitin gleamed with a dark, oily sheen as it banked in the air, its many eyes glinting like polished obsidian.

It came without warning, folding its wings and dropping from the air like a living spear. Gundur barely had time to lift his shield before the creature slammed into him with a crack of chitin against steel. The bite was like a pair of jagged knives, punching through armor with an audible crunch, driving him to the ground. The dwarf grunted, air blasting from his lungs as the Scarab's claws tore at the earth beside him. He tried to push himself up, but the force of the impact had knocked him flat.

Korin was already moving, the half-elf's blade singing as it left its scabbard. He darted in under the creature's guard, slashing deep into the plates between its legs. A spray of thick, black ichor hissed on the rocks, but the Scarab barely flinched. Overhead, Cyra's voice rose in a sharp, arcane chant, his staff flaring with a sickly red light before he hurled a bead of fire high into the air. It blossomed into a roaring inferno mid-flight, engulfing the Scarab's wings in flames. The smell of burning chitin hit the party in a wave, sharp and acrid.

Ardan followed in her wake, hands outstretched as he summoned another sphere of flame. It streaked upward, bursting against the Scarab's side with a deep, concussive *whump*. The beast screeched, a shrill, metallic wail that rattled teeth.

Above the chaos, Gundur rolled to his knees, snarling a curse, his greatsword already in hand —but the Scarab was moving again. Beating its wings with furious speed, it rose into the air, twisting toward Cyra. The wizard barely had time to raise his staff before it was on him, driving him to the ground in an explosion of dust and snapping stone. The bite punched through his robes, teeth scraping bone, and he cried out, blood spilling freely onto the rocks. A claw followed, smashing into his ribs with the force of a falling boulder.

Cyra's breath came in ragged bursts, his vision swimming. Somewhere through the haze he heard Korin shout, felt rather than saw his sword strike home again. The Scarab reeled under the blow—just as another fireball from Ardan slammed into its back, the explosion hurling it sideways in the air. The force ripped through its carapace, splitting blackened plates, and the creature gave a final, distorted screech before crashing to the ground in a smoking heap.

The battlefield was suddenly still, save for the ragged breathing of the party. Gundur hauled himself to his feet, brushing grit from his beard, while Indra prodded the carcass with the tip of her blade. Cyra lay prone, his pale hands pressed to his wounds, crimson seeping between his fingers. Korin was already at his side, producing a small glass vial.

“Hold still,” he said, tilting the healing potion to his lips. The liquid was warm, tasting faintly of herbs and iron, and with each swallow the stabbing pain dulled. The bleeding stopped, the magic knitting flesh together in faint, silvery seams.

When he finally sat up, the Scarab’s remains were still steaming, its broken wings curled like burnt parchment. The stink of the fight hung in the air—smoke, blood, and scorched chitin—a harsh reminder of how close the battle had come to claiming one of their own. But the cliffs were silent now, and for the moment, they had won.

The cavern was silent now except for the boy’s ragged sobs and the drip of water from the stone ceiling. The smell of the dead Scarab lingered, heavy and acrid, mixing with the copper tang of blood. Gundur knelt beside the boy, his broad hands surprisingly gentle as he pulled him close. “You’re safe now,” he murmured, though the words sounded more like an order than comfort. The child’s thin frame shook against him, his fists clutching at the dwarf’s collar. Without another word, Gundur hoisted him over his shoulder, the boy’s face pressed into the fur lining of his cloak.

Korin moved quietly to where the two small bodies lay, their broken forms pale in the torchlight. He unfolded a large cloth sack from his pack, the canvas stiff with the cold. One by one, with the steady hands of a man used to grim work, he gathered what could be gathered, wrapping each piece as carefully as the rough conditions allowed. The bag was tied shut and slung across his back, its weight a mute reminder of the task yet to be finished.

The party’s torch cast long, swaying shadows along the tunnel walls as they retraced their steps. Every click of stone underfoot seemed louder now, each whisper of wind through narrow cracks sounding like a distant voice. The air was cooler the closer they came to the surface, and the faint draft from the main cave brought with it the welcome scent of pine and snow.

Indra kept point, bow still in hand, her eyes flicking into the dark corners of each side tunnel as they passed. The cave’s earlier noises were gone, replaced by the steady rhythm of boots and the occasional muffled whimper from the child over Gundur’s shoulder. Cyra stayed near the rear, staff at the ready, watching their backs until the gray hint of daylight began to show ahead.

When they stepped out into the open air, the cold hit them like a wall. The sky was overcast, a heavy lid of cloud pressing low over the peaks. The snow here was untouched except for their earlier trail, the wide prints of the Scarab now partially filled by fresh flurries. Gundur shifted the boy slightly to keep his head shielded from the wind, and Korin adjusted the strap of the sack on his back.

The descent began cautiously, boots sliding on icy patches they had crossed in greater haste before. The rope crossings were slower now—Gundur went first across the chasm, the boy clinging tightly to him, and once he was secure, the others followed. Ardan moved with deliberate care, the memory of her earlier near-fall still fresh, the rope held tight by Indra's steady grip from the far side.

By the time they reached the ridgeline, the wind had picked up, howling between the rocks and sending sharp flurries into their faces. The cold gnawed at their fingers even through the fur-lined gloves, and each step seemed to sink deeper into snow than the last. The boy had stopped crying, his face hidden, but his body trembled with each gust.

They paused briefly under a rocky overhang, sheltered just enough to rest. Gundur lowered the boy to sit against the stone while Indra handed him a waterskin. The child drank slowly, his eyes darting between the party members as though still unsure if safety was real. No one spoke much; the mountain had a way of stealing words, leaving only the quiet focus of moving forward.

When they started again, the trail dropped sharply, the white world of Albardack's valley still hidden beyond the last ridge. The weight of their burdens—both living and dead—made the descent feel longer than the climb. The cold pressed in, and the only warmth came from the steady, unspoken determination that they would not stop until they saw the town's gates again.

The path wound downward through the jagged ribs of the mountains, each turn revealing more of the snow-choked valley below. The descent was harder now; every step had to be placed with care, for the snow hid slick ice and loose stones that shifted treacherously underfoot. Gundur kept the boy slung securely across his shoulder, one arm hooked around the child's legs, the other free to balance himself as he negotiated the steep slopes. The boy had gone quiet, his face buried against the dwarf's collar, his small hands gripping the rough fabric as if letting go would bring the darkness back.

Korin carried the sack over one shoulder, the canvas stiff with cold and stained darker in patches where the snow had touched it. The weight was not great, but it seemed to pull heavier on him with each step. His eyes stayed on the trail ahead, scanning for patches of ground that might give way, his mind turning over the difficult conversations waiting for them in Albardack.

Ardan moved carefully just ahead of him, her cloak snapping in the wind, the torch she carried guttering and flaring in turns as the air swirled through the narrow gullies. Indra ranged slightly forward, bow in hand though there was no sign of movement on the snowfields ahead. Cyra, bringing up the rear, walked with his staff angled slightly outward, its tip occasionally striking the ice to test its hold.

They reached the chasm again, the wind here sharper, curling up from the depths with a cold that cut through their clothes. The rope they had left was stiff and half-buried under fresh snow. Gundur crossed first, slow and deliberate, his boots finding the same footholds as

before. The boy's arms tightened around his neck when they were halfway across, and Gundur murmured something low and steady until they stepped onto solid ground again. One by one, the others crossed—Ardan last this time, her jaw set, fingers locked tightly on the rope until Indra pulled her onto the far ledge.

From there, the slope gentled, but the snow grew deeper, and the wind dropped away, leaving only the sound of their own movement and the occasional creak of shifting ice. They pushed through drifts up to their knees, boots heavy with the wet weight. Twice they stopped to rest, huddled in the lee of boulders while Korin checked the boy's face for signs of frostbite. Each time, the child blinked at them, still silent but no longer trembling quite as violently.

At last, the valley opened before them. Through the shifting veil of falling snow, the shapes of Albardack's outer buildings emerged—low, dark roofs, chimneys sending up faint columns of smoke, and beyond them the sturdy timbers of the town gate. Figures moved along the palisade, and when the guards caught sight of the approaching party, one of them pointed sharply toward the group.

By the time they trudged the last stretch of road, the gates were swinging open, and the muffled clamor of voices carried to them—some calling in recognition, others already demanding news. The warmth of the town seemed close enough to touch, but its air would not be easy to breathe until the task they had carried back from the mountains was done.

The word of their return moved through Albardack faster than the wind. By the time they reached the open square just inside the gates, a knot of townsfolk had gathered, faces pale in the chill air, eyes straining to see who walked with the party. The boy's mother broke from the crowd in a run, her scarf flying loose behind her, tears streaming down her cheeks. She reached Gundur, her hands trembling as she took her son from his arms. The child clung to her, and she dropped to her knees in the snow, pressing her face to his hair and crying aloud—raw, desperate sobs that echoed off the buildings.

Behind her, two couples pushed forward, their faces drawn tight with fear. They searched the party's faces, their eyes flitting from Gundur to Indra to Korin. It was Korin who stepped forward, his voice quiet but steady. "Your children… they didn't make it. The creature took them before we arrived. We brought them back for you." He lowered the cloth sack from his shoulder, holding it out with both hands.

The mothers froze, staring at the stained bundle. One let out a thin, keening wail that seemed to pull the breath from the cold air, while the other covered her mouth, her knees buckling until her husband caught her. One father took the bag in his arms, holding it as if it might still contain warmth, his lips moving soundlessly. The other reached to touch the canvas, then pulled his hand back as if burned.

They turned away slowly, the crowd parting in silence, and began the long walk toward the edge of town where the ground lay frozen. Their steps dragged, and their grief clung to them like a second shadow. The boy's mother held her son tighter, rocking him as if to will the memory of the mountains from his mind.

The party said nothing as they left the square. The weight of the moment pressed hard on their shoulders, heavier than the snow. They went straight to the Imbol, Halric wordlessly setting out a bottle of the strong, clear spirit distilled from winter rye. The burn of it was harsh and welcome, cutting through the taste of cold and blood. They drank in silence, letting the warmth seep in slow, heavy waves.

In the days that followed, the town settled back into its winter rhythm. The party took their place in it again, though the memory of the cave never truly left. Indra and Ardan visited the baths, steam rising in thick curls as they sank into the heat, letting it draw the chill from their bones. Gundur helped Halric bring in barrels from the cellar, while Korin and Cyra kept to quieter corners. Outside, snow fell heavy for weeks, burying roofs and blocking narrow lanes. The party joined the townsfolk in shoveling paths, breaking ice from doorframes, and digging out houses where the drifts had reached the windowsills. Their muscles ached, but the work was welcome—a way to spend the strength that might otherwise have been lost to thought.

Months passed, the sky slowly softening in color, the sun climbing higher each day. Then, one morning, the air changed. It was still cold, but not the sharp, cutting cold of winter. The snow began to sink into itself, shrinking back from fenceposts and doorsteps, the packed white roads turning dark with meltwater. Streams awoke from their long silence, trickling first, then rushing, carrying shards of ice like broken glass.

The first green pushed through the softened ground—tiny shoots along the base of the wells, clusters of pale flowers no bigger than a fingernail, their petals trembling in the breeze. Birds returned, their songs hesitant at first, then swelling into a chorus that carried across the valley. The scent of damp earth replaced the dry bite of frost, and the mountains shed their winter coats in streaks of black rock and silver runoff. Albardack's fields stirred, and with them, so did the people. Doors stayed open longer, the sound of laughter spilled into the streets, and the party found themselves watching the world change, the grip of winter loosening finger by finger.

The Imbol was warm that afternoon, the low murmur of voices mingling with the crackle of the fire. Outside, the spring rain fell in a steady whisper against the windows, blurring the world beyond. The party sat at their usual table, mugs half-full, the smell of roasted meat lingering in the air. It was Mirda who broke the calm, her black shawl clinging damply to her thin frame as she appeared at their table without warning.

"She's gone," Mirda said flatly, her pale eyes fixed on them. "My sister Lida. Passed in her sleep, two nights ago." There was no softness in her tone, only a restless urgency that made the hairs on the back of Korin's neck stir. "But that isn't why I'm here. Something's wrong in that house."

She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "I went there this morning. As soon as I crossed the threshold, I felt it—a weight in the air, like the air before a storm, only colder. The rooms… they were changed. Furniture shifted, drawers pulled open. And then it struck me." She tapped the side of her head with one bony finger. "Not with a hand—no, with force. Sent me

sprawling. A vase flew from the mantel. Then a shoe, of all things. I blacked out on the floor."

Mirda's gaze swept over each of them in turn. "I want that house for my own. But not until whatever is in there is driven out. Will you see to it?"

The party exchanged brief glances. There was no real discussion—only a few short nods.

By the time they reached Lida's home, the rain had stopped, leaving the street glistening under a heavy sky. The shutters were half-closed, the door unlocked. Inside, the air was still and faintly sweet, touched with the lingering scent of dried lavender. Dust lay thick on the shelves, motes drifting through the light that fell in narrow bands across the floorboards. Framed paintings of Lida's family stared from the walls, their sepia faces caught in silent smiles. Everything was as one might expect in the home of someone recently gone—only a little too still, as though holding its breath.

They searched methodically. An old wooden chest at the foot of Lida's bed held folded quilts, a bundle of letters tied with ribbon, and a small wooden box that pressed out mold when Ardan turned the key. The cellar smelled of earth and damp stone, shelves lined with dusty jars of preserves long past use. The attic was cramped, its beams hung with cobwebs that clung to their faces as they ducked beneath. All was quiet.

Hours passed. The light outside dimmed toward evening, and the house settled into the kind of silence that pressed into the ears. The party sat in the parlor, waiting, the floorboards creaking now and then under no weight they could see.

It happened without warning. Indra, on her way down the narrow staircase, gave a sharp cry as something unseen slammed into her chest. She tumbled, striking her head on the wall with a sickening thud before hitting the bottom step. Blood trickled down her temple.

Gundur rose at once, but before he could reach her, an iron pot from the kitchen flew across the room, smashing against his shoulder hard enough to make him stagger. The impact rang through the air like a struck bell.

The house seemed to wake. A chair slid three feet across the floor without a sound. The curtains lifted as if in a breeze, though the windows were shut tight. Somewhere upstairs, a door slammed so hard the walls trembled. The faint sound of footsteps—light, quick, wrong—skittered along the hallway above.

Cyra's staff caught the flicker of movement in its reflection, but when he turned, there was nothing. Only the old paintings on the wall, their faded eyes seeming to watch the room with quiet accusation.

The air grew colder, the kind of cold that crept inside the bones, and a low groan came from somewhere deep in the house—not quite human, not quite the sound of settling wood. They were no longer simply in an old woman's home. Something else was here, unseen but very much awake.

The air grew cold as the party stepped into a shadowed room, their breath fogging in the dim light. The faint sound of whispering drifted from nowhere and everywhere at once. Then, from the darkness, pale shapes slid into view—five translucent figures, their hollow eyes glinting with malice - Poltergeists .

Korin reacted first, his bowstring singing as an arrow, tipped with enchanted steel, cut through the air and tore into one of the spirits. The creature's form rippled but did not fade. A heartbeat later, the first poltergeist lunged at him, its clawed hand passing through his armor like smoke. Pain like icy fire shot through Korin's veins.

Cyra, undaunted, raised his hands, summoning a roaring sphere of flame that burst among the phantoms. The blast lit the chamber in a brilliant flare, the spirits writhing and screeching as ghostly embers scattered across the floor. One wavered, another was left barely holding its shape.

Indra's arrows flew in the chaos, cleaving through ectoplasmic bodies with precise, devastating hits. Gundur followed, his massive weapon smashing into another spirit, each swing scattering wisps of ghostly essence into the stale air. But even as the party pressed forward, one of the poltergeists drifted silently behind Cyra. Its hand sank into his chest—not to wound, but to claim.

Cyra froze. His eyes went white, his body locking unnaturally still. When he moved again, it was not his will guiding him. A cruel smile, alien to his face, spread across his lips. The party's stomachs sank as realization struck—the spirit had taken him.

The battle turned desperate. They ducked and wove around Cyra, unwilling to harm him, as the possessed dwarf advanced under the poltergeist's control. Gundur gritted his teeth, already wounded and weakened by the spirits' draining touch, while Korin fought to hold their ground against the remaining apparitions.

Then, in the swirl of panic, Korin acted. Whispering a prayer, he reached out with a warding incantation—Protection from Evil and Good. The magic surged over Cyra in a faint golden shimmer. The poltergeist within him let out a soundless scream as it was torn from his body, its form erupting back into view, weakened and flickering.

There was no hesitation. Gundur roared and brought his weapon down in a sweeping arc. The spirit shattered in a burst of pale light, the echoes of its wail fading into silence.

The chamber was still once more. Korin lowered his bow and Gundur slumped, weary from both wounds and the creeping weight of poltergeist caused exhaustion. Cyra steadied himself, the cold touch of the spirit still lingering in his bones. The air smelled faintly of ozone and ancient dust.

They stepped out of Lida's house into the pale afternoon light, the air cool and damp after the stale heaviness inside. Gundur moved slowly, each step heavy, his eyes half-closed with exhaustion. The fight had left him drained in a way no mere physical wound could explain. His breath came shallow, and there was a faint, unhealthy hue to the scratches on his arms and neck, a creeping darkness where the poltergeist's touch had sunk into flesh.

Korin and Ardan took most of his weight between them, while Cyra kept close, watchful in case Gundur faltered entirely. Indra led the way back through the muddy lanes toward the Imbol, the steady rhythm of their boots marking the only sound between them.

Inside the inn, Halric was quick to clear the way to the stairs. They got Gundur into his room, lowering him gently onto the bed. The dwarf's eyes fluttered, but he didn't resist as Korin knelt beside him, placing a hand over the worst of the wounds. His voice dropped into the slow cadence of prayer, each word pulling faint threads of golden light from his palm into Gundur's skin. The dark rot receded, color returned to the flesh, and the deep tension in Gundur's jaw eased.

When Korin finished, Gundur's breathing had evened out, his eyes already shut in a healing sleep. "He'll be right again after rest," Korin said quietly, standing. "But it will take the night."

The others left him there, descending to the common room where the warmth of the hearth and the smell of roasting meat were a welcome change from the house's cold emptiness. They had just found a table when the door opened and Mirda swept in, her black shawl pulled tight against her shoulders. She made straight for them.

"Well?" she asked, her voice taut.

Indra met her gaze evenly. "Poltergeists. They were inhabiting the house. It's safe now."

Mirda's lips pressed thin, and for a heartbeat her eyes darted toward the floor. "Was my sister… was Lida among them?"

"No," Indra said firmly. "This was not her spirit. These were darker energies—things that moved in after her passing. Whatever they were, they're gone."

Mirda exhaled slowly, then murmured a short prayer under her breath, words too old to place. She reached into the folds of her shawl and produced a small leather pouch, setting it on the table. "Seventy-five gold, as promised. And my thanks. You've done more than you know."

She stayed for a moment longer, speaking of her craft. "In my time, I've seen the places where the veil is thin. Spirits linger there, drawn to grief or fear, to unfinished threads of fate. Some are harmless, content to watch. Others… others feed on the living, drawing warmth from them until only a shell remains. I've met merchants whose caravans were haunted by voices calling from their own wagons, sailors who swore their ship's wake was followed by shadows in the waves. The world is full of such things, if you know where to look."

With that, she pulled her shawl tighter, nodded once more, and slipped out into the night.

The party ordered a round of strong, dark ale. The first mouthful burned pleasantly, chasing away the chill that still clung to them. Korin took out a pipe and lit it, the scent of spiced tobacco curling upward in slow tendrils. The day slid into evening, and the tavern filled with life—farmers shaking snowmelt from their coats, trappers clapping each other on the back, merchants haggling half-seriously over drinks. Laughter rose over the low hum of talk, mugs clinked together in toasts, and the fire's light played across faces flushed with warmth and company. Outside, the rain whispered on, but within the walls of the Imbol, the night belonged to camaraderie and the comfort of being among friends.

On the Road

The morning they left Albardack dawned clear, the air soft with the warmth of early spring. Their room in the Imbol had grown familiar over the long months—a scatter of gear in the corners, cloaks hung neatly by the door, the faint scent of woodsmoke and pine from the hearth they had so often gathered around. Packing felt strange, like folding away a chapter of their lives, each item stowed in a pack stirring a memory of the winter just passed.

They stepped out into sunlight that painted the valley in gold. The snow was gone from the lower slopes, replaced by grass pushing fresh green blades through the damp earth. Along the roadside, clusters of blue and white flowers nodded in the breeze, their petals trembling under the weight of early morning dew. A narrow stream ran parallel to the road, its water bright and quick, the song of it joining the chorus of birds above. From somewhere in the meadow, a fox appeared, rust-red against the grass, nosing the ground before digging with quick, sharp movements.

The road stretched ahead, a ribbon of small rock pebbles and pale dust that crunched beneath their boots. Indra, walking a few paces ahead, began to sing—her voice clear and bright, carrying easily on the warm air. It was an old Elven song, the words flowing like water over stone:

Beneath the boughs where silver streams are born,
I wandered far in light of gentle morn,
The leaves above in whispered counsel swayed,
And all the dreams of summer there were laid.

Through starlit fields where blossoms find their rest,
The moonlight wove her cloak upon my breast,
And rivers told me secrets as they ran,
Of all the paths the ancient winds began.

O bright the day when hearts and roads are one,
When every mile is measured in the sun,
And every shadow cast along the way
Is just a place where light will pause to play.

So take my hand, and let the journey grow,
Through mountain pass and meadow's tender glow,
The road will sing, the sky will keep our vow,
And all the world is ours to wander now.

Gundur smoked quietly, the pipe's ember glowing faintly in the morning light. He scratched at his beard, lost in his own thoughts as the song rose and fell.

An hour later, the creak of wheels reached them from behind. A trader's wagon appeared, drawn by two sturdy mules, with a third roped behind. On the bench sat a man with weathered hands, a smiling woman beside him, and two children peering curiously over the side. The wagon itself was crowded with crates and sacks, rolls of cloth, the restless cluck of chickens in a wicker cage, and even a small sheep tied near the back.

The driver reined in at their hail, and after a short exchange, Gundur and the trader haggled over one plump hen. The price was met with a firm handshake, the bird handed over in a woven carrier, its wings rustling indignantly. With parting waves, the wagon creaked on toward the hills.

They continued southward, the weight of their packs slowing their pace but not dimming the quiet contentment of the day. Meadows opened on either side, rolling gently toward low hills tufted with wildflowers. The breeze was warm, carrying the scent of damp soil and distant pine, and somewhere far off, a lark trilled high in the sky. The dust rose faintly from the road with each step, softening the edges of the world in a golden haze as they walked on into the heart of spring.

The lake appeared like a jewel among the meadows, its surface calm and catching the pale blue of the spring sky. A fringe of willows leaned over the water, their fresh green leaves shivering in the light breeze. The party slowed as they reached its bank, taking in the sight and the soft lap of water against the shore.

“This’ll do for the night,” Gundur said, his eyes sweeping the ground for a good camp spot. He shrugged off his pack and began unpacking the tents—thick canvas folded tight, their wooden poles bundled with leather straps. With practiced movements, he drove stakes into the soft earth, threading the canvas over the frame and securing it with knotted cord.

Korin wandered off toward a stand of trees, scanning the ground beneath their boughs. He returned not long after with an armful of dry branches, brittle twigs tucked into the pile. He dropped them in a loose pyramid on a patch of bare ground and pulled out a small pouch of tinder—dry leaves and curls of bark gathered on the road. A few strikes of flint sent sparks onto the nest of tinder, and with a gentle breath, the fire caught, crackling to life.

Ardan knelt near her pack, unfastening a set of fishing rod sections. The polished pieces clicked together as she assembled them, the line spooled neatly from a small brass reel. From a side pouch she drew a hand shovel and began turning over clumps of moist earth, finding fat worms in the dark soil and dropping them into a tin. She cast her line from the end of a small rock shelf, the bait vanishing with a soft plunk into the water.

Cyra busied himself spreading sleeping bags into the tents as Gundur finished them, then settled cross-legged with his spellbook open, lips moving soundlessly over lines of runes and arcane diagrams. Indra, meanwhile, lay on her back in the grass, one arm behind her head, watching a pair of clouds drift lazily across the sky.

From his pack, Gundur brought out the hen, its feathers ruffling in the breeze. Without ceremony, he drew his knife and in one quick motion ended it, working with methodical precision to pluck the bird, split it open, and remove its innards. He rinsed it in the cool shallows of the lake, the red washing away in slow spirals.

Indra fetched their iron pot and filled it with clear lake water, setting it over the now-bright fire. The chicken went in whole, followed by sliced carrots, onions, sprigs of greens, and a fistful of diced potatoes. A pinch of dried herbs from her pack brought a rich aroma that mingled with the scent of woodsmoke. Cyra produced a loaf of crusty bread, setting it beside the fire.

As the stew simmered, the water drew some of them in. Ardan waded first, laughing as she splashed Korin when he followed. Soon even Gundur shed his boots and stepped in to wash, the icy water drawing sharp breaths and grins. The sound of splashing and playful shouts carried over the water until the smell of the cooking chicken pulled them back.

They gathered around as Indra ladled the stew into bowls. The broth was golden, the chicken tender and rich with flavor. “By the gods,” Korin said after the first mouthful, “this could make a man forget he’s on the road.”

They ate slowly, savoring each bite, washing it down with swigs of ale from their waterskins. The warmth of the meal spread through them, loosening muscles and smoothing the edges of weariness.

When the bowls were empty, they sprawled on the grass and their sleeping bags, the sun dipping low toward the horizon. Gundur lay back with a satisfied groan. “If the road ahead is as fair as today, I’ll not complain.”

“Fair roads, fair skies,” Ardan replied, pulling her cloak closer. “But it’ll turn again. Always does.”

Indra smiled faintly, eyes closed. “Then we’ll walk through it, same as always.”

The fire crackled on, sending sparks upward into the deepening sky as voices softened and the camp settled into the easy quiet of contented travelers.

The sun had slipped low, painting the lake in copper and rose, when a figure appeared along the road. The man walked with an easy, steady pace, though his shoulders drooped with the weight of travel. He was tall, fair-skinned, with hair the pale gold of ripe wheat, his ears the subtle points of elvenkind. A small sack hung from one shoulder, a plain dagger rode at his hip beside a stoppered glass vial of red liquid, and under his arm he carried a thick, leather-bound book.

As he reached the edge of the camp, he paused, offering a small bow. “Good evening, travelers. Might I join you for a while? I’m weary from the road, and the sight of your fire is the most welcome thing I’ve seen all day.”

Indra gestured toward the flames. “You’re welcome to it. Sit, rest your feet.”

The elf settled gratefully onto the grass. Cyra’s gaze had already gone to the book under his arm. “And what do you carry there? Looks too well-kept for just a journal.”

Miridor smiled faintly, brushing a stray leaf from the cover. “A herbal book. I am a herbalist—traveling to find new species, sketch them, taste them, and record their properties. The world grows stranger the closer you look at it.”

Cyra leaned forward. “May I see it?”

“Of course.” Miridor handed it over with both hands, as one might a cherished thing. The pages opened to a full-color drawing of a delicate violet blossom, its stem curling like a question mark, with neat script flowing beneath. Cyra read aloud a passage.

“The Dewpetal, found in shaded valleys after heavy rain. The petals may be brewed for a tea that eases fevers, though the root, when eaten raw, will cause vivid dreams and a sense of walking in two worlds at once.”

Cyra glanced up, intrigued, then closed the book and returned it.

Miridor accepted it, resting it across his knees. “Plants are my friends, you see. Each has its own voice, if you’re patient enough to listen. I’ve sat in the middle of a thicket and heard them whisper to each other. Some carry you inward, into places behind your own eyes—whole landscapes of color and sound you cannot see here.” He looked toward the lake, his eyes distant. “Not all things are meant for human sight. And yet, the plants know them.”

“Sounds like you’ve been nipping a few too many dream-roots,” Gundur muttered with a faint grin, running a whetstone along the edge of his blade. Indra chuckled. “Maybe. But his drawings are fine work.”

Miridor’s stomach growled audibly, and Ardan laughed. “Here, try some chicken before your spirit world swallows you whole.”

They passed him a generous bowl of the stew’s remainder, and he ate as though it had been days since his last proper meal. Between bites, he murmured his thanks. Cyra fetched his own spellbook, carefully copying down several entries Miridor pointed out—one about a climbing vine that could knit shallow wounds closed within an hour, another about a flower whose pollen glowed faintly under moonlight.

Around them, the camp settled into its rhythm. Gundur finished sharpening his blade and wiped it with an oiled rag. Korin sat cross-legged, trimming and straightening arrow shafts before binding the heads with thread. Indra gathered their cooking gear, scrubbing the pot clean in the shallows of the lake, while Ardan rolled the fishing line and coiled it neatly into her pack.

“Tomorrow,” Korin said, tying off another arrow, “we’ll reach the ridge before noon if the weather holds.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Indra asked without looking up.

“Then we’ll curse, get wet, and keep walking,” Gundur replied, tucking the whetstone away.

The fire popped, sending a swirl of sparks into the warm night air. Miridor leaned back, sated, the book in his lap once more, the soft murmur of their voices mingling with the rustle of grass and the gentle lapping of the lake.

Miridor sat a little closer to the fire, the light catching the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. He turned the book in his lap as if weighing whether to speak, then looked up at the party. “I come from Goldor,” he began, his voice low, “a city of marble streets and high gates, where the air always smells faintly of mint and rosemary from the apothecaries. I was born there and, in my youth, taken into the Herbalist Order—a society older than any stone in that city. It was founded centuries ago by Ilgam, a druid said to have spoken with the green things that pushed through the world’s soil. The order was dedicated to healing, to making potions and salves for the sick, to sharing knowledge with any who came to learn. In those halls, the air was heavy with the scent of drying leaves and crushed blossoms, and the long oak tables were littered with open books and clay bowls of half-ground roots.”

He paused, his gaze briefly distant. “I spent ten years there. Ten years learning the shape of every leaf, the bitter sting of certain saps on the tongue, the delicate timing needed to draw a plant’s virtue into liquid form. We kept meticulous records—illustrations, measurements, properties—everything bound into volumes kept in the herbarium library. In the daylight hours, we cured the sick. By night, I would still be there, bent over the worktable, candlelight pooling over pages as I copied notes.”

The fire crackled. “But something changed,” he said, and his tone tightened. “It began with the two grand herbalists—old masters, the leaders of our order. I do not know when it started, only that they began whispering together in corners, their robes marked with strange stains, their eyes shadowed as though they had not slept. Potions no longer went only to the apothecaries. They began to mix poisons—subtle ones, that left no trace in the body but death. People came to them in secret, coins clinking in the dark, leaving with small glass vials.”

He shifted, staring into the flames. “Rituals followed. They would lock the herbarium’s doors at night, and through the cracks in the shutters, I saw strange lights—green and red, flickering like fireflies. I was invited to join them once. They spoke of the ‘dark roots’ of the plant world, the poisons that open the mind to other realms. They consumed mushrooms so venomous they should have killed them, yet instead they fell into trances, eyes rolling white, lips moving in languages I had never heard. And they swore that in those trances, they communed with… beings. Things older than the soil itself. Things that taught them secrets no one should know.”

His jaw clenched. “Then the sacrifices began. At first, it was small creatures—a squirrel, a hen. They told the apprentices these were offerings to the spirit of the earth. But the offerings grew. A ram, its blood poured over the roots of a blackthorn tree. And then… an ox. Brought into the herbarium itself, slaughtered and deified, its head mounted on a plinth. The grand herbalists wore amulets shaped like oxen’s heads, carved from bone, and spoke to each other in a tongue that made my skin crawl.”

Miridor’s voice dropped to a whisper. “One night, I returned late from gathering herbs outside the city and found the herbarium doors ajar. Inside, there was no light save for a dim glow at the far end of the hall. I followed it, past the tables and shelves, until I reached the ritual chamber. And there… I saw it.” His eyes locked on the fire, unblinking. “A demon. Not a thing of flesh, but of shadow, whose edges bled into the air. Its eyes burned deep red—not like coals, but like something alive, watching. It looked at me… and I felt it, it was looking into my soul. My body was nothing to it. It knew everything about me, every fear, every kindness I’d ever done.”

The fire popped, startling a bird from the reeds at the lake’s edge. Miridor’s voice was hoarse now. “I ran. I don’t remember leaving the building, only that my feet carried me through the gates of Goldor and into the dark fields beyond. I didn’t stop until the city was far away from me. And I’ve been walking ever since, keeping to the roads, never staying long in one place. I will not go back there.”

He fell silent, staring into the flames as if the shapes there might rise into something he knew all too well.

The party listened to Miridor's tale to the very end, the firelight throwing long shadows across their faces. When the elf finally fell silent, Gundur shifted, resting his blade across his knees. "There are always dark cults in the world," he said, his voice low but steady. "Old ones hiding in the cracks, new ones sprouting where power tempts the weak. Not surprising that more keep forming—surprising only when they don't." The group sat in thoughtful silence after that, the fire popping and hissing as it sank into embers. One by one, they drifted into sleep, and soon even Miridor's soft snoring joined the quiet sounds of the night.

Morning came pale and warm, the lake's surface rippling in the breeze. Miridor was still curled on a soft patch of grass when Gundur stirred the embers back to life. The elf woke with a stretch and a groggy smile. "Thank you for the shelter and the meal," he said, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a small handful of gold coins. "A token of my gratitude."

Indra waved the offer away. "Keep it. The road will find plenty of ways to take your gold from you soon enough."

Miridor gave a short bow, a glint of respect in his eyes. "Then I thank you again, and I hope our paths cross in brighter times." He slung his sack over his shoulder, tucked his book under his arm, and walked on down the road until he was no more than a figure in the shimmering distance.

The party set about their own preparations. Tents came down one by one, the canvas rolled tight and bound with leather straps. Cyra scattered the last embers of the fire, stamping them into the damp earth. Korin passed around the leftover chicken from the night before, the meat still rich with the herbs Indra had used. Stomachs full and gear stowed, they shouldered their heavy packs and set out once more.

The road wound gently along the edge of wide meadows, the grass still beaded with morning dew. A warm breeze moved across the fields, carrying with it the scent of wet soil and distant wildflowers. Somewhere far off, a crow cackled, its rough voice carrying on the air. The sky grew dimmer as soft rain began to fall, cool droplets pattering against their cloaks and speckling the dusty path.

They followed the footpath straight for a time, the steady crunch of gravel underfoot mixing with the rhythmic swish of wet grass against their boots. Eventually, the trail bent left and began to climb a small hill. The view widened with each step, the meadow spilling away behind them in a patchwork of green and gold.

Halfway up, Korin caught his boot on a protruding stone and pitched forward, his heavy pack pulling him down hard into the dust. "By the Nine Hells!" he barked, his voice muffled by the ground.

Gundur reached him first, hauling him up by the straps of his pack. "You trying to plant your face in every road we walk?"

Korin brushed dirt from his cheek with a scowl. “Just testing it for softness. Results so far: disappointing.”

Ardan laughed, shaking her head. “Save the acrobatics for when someone’s watching.”

Indra glanced back toward the path ahead, rain glittering in her hair. “Come on. The sooner we’re over this hill, the sooner we find a dry place to stop.”

With the banter fading into chuckles, they pressed on, boots squelching softly in the damp soil, the curve of the hill hiding whatever lay ahead.

The faint sound of something shifting beneath the earth made the party tense, hands drifting to weapons. Without warning, the ground bulged. Stones rattled loose—and then the earth erupted.

The Carrionborer Worm burst forth in a spray of dirt and foul-smelling muck, its enormous, mucous-slick body glistening in the torchlight. Its mouth gaped wide, ringed with jagged teeth and trailing strands of rancid slime.

Gundur was the first to move, rushing forward with a roar. His sword hacked deep into the worm’s hide once, twice, each blow carving fresh rents that oozed black ichor. Arrows whistled overhead as Indra took her shot, two shafts driving into the beast’s thick neck, sinking to the fletching despite the slime.

Behind them, Cyra raised both hands and unleashed a sphere of blazing fire. The blast roared into the worm’s side, the heat peeling strips of slime and flesh away in smoking sheets. The stench doubled, thick and choking, as the worm writhed in pain.

Still it came on. With an almost serpentine lurch, it lunged at Gundur, its teeth closing around his shoulder with bone-cracking force. The dwarf grunted, shoving himself free before the worm could pull him under, strands of the foul muck clinging to his armor. Then its head whipped toward Indra, slamming into her hard enough to stagger her. She gasped, the slime clinging to her like a living thing, seeping into her clothes and skin, the smell turning her stomach.

Korin's bow twanged, a shaft driving into the worm's gaping maw. Ardan stepped forward, eyes blazing, and hurled another wave of fire into the writhing mass. Flames caught in the slime, hissing and spitting as they crawled over the beast's bulk.

The worm spasmed violently, its great body thrashing against the ground. Deep gashes from Gundur's blade, arrows jutting from its throat, patches of burning slime — all of it taking its toll. With a final, guttural hiss, it collapsed, half-sliding back into the tunnel from which it came. The ground shook once, and then all was still.

The party stood in the steaming silence, chests heaving. The reek of rot and scorched slime hung heavy in the air. Gundur wiped his blade clean on the dirt. Indra spat, trying to get the taste of the stench from her mouth. They had faced the foul thing and lived — but the smell, and the knowledge of what hunted beneath the earth, would stay with them long after they left this place.

Without warning, the ground erupted in a geyser of soil and stones. The second Carrionborer Worm surged into the light, its mucous-slick body glistening under the sun. Shreds of grass and earth slid from its bulk as it uncoiled to its full, terrifying height, its maw opening in a circle of jagged, grinding teeth. The stench of decay rolled over the party like a wave.

Gundur charged first, his sword flashing in the daylight. He struck twice in rapid succession, each blow tearing ragged rents in the worm's hide and flinging clumps of slime into the grass. Cyra stepped forward, chanting in a low, rolling cadence before thrusting both palms forward. A globe of searing flame erupted amidst the worm's coils, bathing it in orange light and filling the meadow with the hiss of burning slime.

Indra loosed two quick arrows, but the beast's twisting bulk made her shots go wide. The worm roared—a deep, guttural vibration that rattled bones—and lunged. Its jaws crashed down on Gundur, the sheer force knocking the dwarf back a step. Foul slime sprayed over him, clinging and reeking, but he shook off the sickness and shoved the creature back with a snarl, planting his feet in the churned earth.

Korin's arrow flew true, burying itself deep into the worm's glistening flesh. Ardan followed with another fireball, the heat washing over the battlefield and igniting patches of slime along the creature's flank. The worm writhed in pain, the grass beneath it charring black.

Then Gundur moved again. Blood streamed down his arm from the fresh bite, his breaths ragged, but his eyes burned with a stubborn, furious light. He raised his sword high, bellowing across the meadow—*"Eat shit, maggot!"*—and brought the blade down in a single, savage stroke.

The steel bit deep, cutting through the worm's thick neck with a wet, tearing sound. The creature convulsed once, twice, and then collapsed in a heap that flattened the grass for yards around. Its bulk twitched briefly before going still, the reek of rot and burning lingering in the warm air.

Gundur staggered, blood dripping steadily from his wounds, but still stood tall, his sword slick with black ichor. Around him, the party watched in silence, the only sounds the crackle of scorched grass and the distant, tentative call of a bird returning to the meadow. The fight was over, but Gundur's injuries told the truth—another worm, another battle, and the line between victory and death had grown perilously thin.

A meat-rending maggot-beast, known to erupt silently from the soil beneath sleepers, tearing flesh with rings of needle teeth and dragging corpses into its reeking burrows. This creature is neither intelligent nor magical — only hunger made muscle, and filth given form.

The Carrionborer lives in underground tunnel systems, burrows, and rotting corpse pits, often dwelling beneath swamps, forest clearings, moss plains, or forgotten grave fields. It prefers soft soil, mud, or loose sand, where it can erupt in total silence.

It has no society, no memory, no hoarding instinct. It kills what it finds, drags it underground, and digests slowly, releasing waste into side pits that often bloom with maggots and other scavenger spawn.

Campers in the wild often disappear without a sound, their tents found half-sunken, slashed apart by acidic slime and gouged by bite-marks.

The Carrionborer Worm is no cursed creature, no demonspawn or magical creation — it is natural horror refined, a predator formed in deep rot pits, in catacomb-slick caverns, or beneath blood-soaked battlefields. It resembles a massive, pale grub, easily 10–15 feet long, with leathery folds, a ringed mouth of razor-edged teeth, and no eyes — only pits that sense movement and heartbeats.

Its stench is unbearable, a mix of feces, bile, and decay, strong enough to choke or mask the smell of its prey.

Gundur sat heavily on the damp earth, one hand pressed against the deep gouge in his side. Blood still seeped through his tunic despite the hasty bandaging. Korin knelt beside him, placing a steadying hand on the dwarf's shoulder. His lips moved in low, deliberate words, the magic settling like warm sunlight into the wounds. The flow of blood slowed, the ragged edges drawing together—enough for the worst of the pain to fade, though angry red lines still marred the skin.

"Better, but not pretty," Korin said, wiping his brow.

Gundur uncorked a healing potion and downed it in a single gulp, the glassy red liquid leaving a faint bitterness on his tongue. He spat into the grass. "Damn those rot-eating maggots," he growled. "Ruined our nice walk. My vision's still swimming."

They stayed put for a while, letting him catch his breath before moving on at a slower pace. The road stretched ahead in long, quiet miles, the clouds above drifting in lazy bands. Hours later, the dark line of Glimwood forest rose before them, its trees so tightly packed that little light seemed to pass between their trunks.

At the forest's edge, they dropped their packs and sat on the grassy verge. Indra passed around strips of dried meat, and Cyra took a pull from his waterskin before handing it along. Korin leaned back on one elbow and lit his pipe, sending spirals of fragrant smoke into the mild evening air.

Ardan's gaze stayed fixed on the treeline. "I don't like this place," she murmured. "Feels wrong. There's something in there that watches."

"Could be just foxes," Cyra said, though his eyes followed hers toward the shadowed path.

"No fox I've ever met makes the air feel like that," she replied.

They debated for a short while, but with Gundur still not fully healed, the choice was made to camp before entering. The tents went up on a patch of firm ground near the road—two sturdy shelters against whatever weather might come. Gundur tended the fire, coaxing it into a bright, steady flame that warmed the circle of camp.

A thin mist began to curl from the meadow, soft tendrils snaking between their boots. Somewhere in the distance, a bird gave a final note before the forest fell into silence. Gundur sat with his pipe, eyes half-lidded, smoke drifting from his beard in slow ribbons.

"How far through do you think it is?" Indra asked after a while, her voice low in the quiet.

"Depends on the trail," Korin replied. "If it's straight and we keep pace, two days. If it twists… could be double."

Ardan snorted. "I'll wager it twists. Forests like that always twist."

"Or worse—splits," Gundur added, tapping ash into the fire. "And the wrong path could put us walking in circles until the trees learn our names."

Cyra cracked a faint smile. "Then let's make sure they don't."

They settled into the soft, steady sounds of the fire, the mist thickening at their backs and the black edge of Glimwood looming quietly ahead. The night promised little comfort, but at least the warmth of the camp kept the darkness at bay—for now.

The mist had thinned by morning, leaving the meadow damp and glistening under the pale light. The air was cool but promised warmth later in the day. The party stirred slowly, stretching out the stiffness from a night on the ground. Tents came down in quiet, practiced motions, canvas rolled and tied, poles bundled and stowed. Indra passed around strips of dried meat for breakfast, while Korin and Gundur lit their pipes, the fragrant smoke curling lazily upward into the still air.

When all was ready, they shouldered their packs and turned toward the dark mouth of Glimwood forest. The footpath narrowed immediately, swallowed by towering trunks that rose like the pillars of an ancient hall. Light filtered through in fractured shafts, dappling the damp, moss-covered ground in shifting patches of green and gold. The air was cool, heavy with the scent of loam and leaf mold. Birdsong was rare here, replaced by the occasional creak of boughs above and the muted drip of water from unseen leaves.

They passed under the drooping canopy, boots squelching as they crossed shallow puddles where rainwater lingered. Strange plants they could not name crowded the forest floor—ferns with fronds like curled claws, pale mushrooms clustered in the shade, and thin, vine-like stalks crowned with tiny crimson flowers that swayed without any breeze. From a small clearing ahead, a deer stood watching them, ears flicking.

“Venison for dinner wouldn’t go amiss,” Gundur muttered, his voice low but not low enough to miss.

Indra shot him a sharp look. “We’re just passing through. Let it be.”

He grunted and kept walking, but his eyes lingered on the animal until it bounded silently away into the shadows. The weight of the packs and the slow, uneven footing made progress sluggish, and Indra’s pace faltered more than once. Days on the road had worn at her, and the damp, heavy air of Glimwood seemed to leech strength from her limbs.

After about an hour, they came upon a patch of wild blueberries growing thick along the edge of the path. The small fruits shone dark blue against the green leaves, and they paused to gather and eat them, their tart sweetness a welcome change from trail rations.

“These trees,” Indra murmured after a time, looking up at the immense trunks surrounding them. She stepped closer to one, resting her hands on its rough bark, then leaned in to embrace it. “They’ve been here longer than any of us will ever live. Imagine what they’ve seen.”

“Tree hugger,” Gundur grunted through a mouthful of berries.

She shot him a glance over her shoulder. “Better to hug a tree than kill one for dinner.”

“It’d feed us,” he said.

“It gives us air,” she replied.

“Air’s free. Dinner isn’t.”

Korin chuckled from where he sat on a fallen log. “And there you have the eternal argument—needs of the body versus needs of the spirit.”

“That’s not fate,” Ardan said, settling beside him with a handful of berries.

“No,” Korin agreed, “but fate has the same balance. We’re all pulled between what we want and what we must do.”

Ardan tilted her head. “I think fate is more like the forest trail. It twists whether you want it to or not, and you walk it until you come out the other side. Your wants don’t matter much to it.”

“Then you’re saying we’re just passengers?” Korin asked.

“I’m saying we’re travelers. The path is there whether or not we walk it. But the speed, the stops we make—that’s ours to choose.”

Korin nodded slowly, glancing toward the darkening trail ahead. “Then let’s choose to keep moving before those shadows start thinking about swallowing us whole.”

They brushed their hands clean of berry juice, adjusted their packs, and pressed deeper into Glimwood.

The trail narrowed again as they walked deeper into the forest, the air heavy and still. After a time, Gundur slowed and muttered, “I’ll be back in a moment. Nature calls.” He stepped off the path, pushing through a tangle of ferns and low branches until he found a quiet spot among the roots of an ancient oak.

A moment later came the sound of shifting earth, followed by a muffled curse—and then a sharp, cracking noise. There was no time for him to shout before the ground beneath him gave way entirely.

“Gundur?” Indra’s voice snapped through the quiet.

They heard the thud of something heavy hitting far below, followed by silence.

The others rushed toward the sound, finding a ragged hole in the forest floor, ringed with splintered roots and clumps of damp soil. It yawned wide enough to swallow a man whole. Looking over the edge, they saw nothing but blackness—so deep that even Cyra’s torchlight failed to touch the bottom.

“Gundur!” Ardan shouted into the dark. Her voice came back to her in a distorted echo, hollow and cold.

No answer.

“Gods,” Indra breathed, gripping the bark of a nearby tree. “What do we do?”

Korin scanned the ground around the pit. “If he’s alive, and I hope to the Nine Hells he is, he’s not getting out of there without a rope. But lowering one down blind like this… we’d be walking right into the dark.”

“There might be a tunnel entrance,” Cyra said quickly. “An old shaft, maybe a cave mouth nearby that connects to whatever’s down there.”

“Then we find it,” Ardan said, already moving toward a cluster of boulders jutting from the mossy earth.

The next hour was a frantic search. They moved through the undergrowth, calling Gundur's name until their throats were raw. Indra pushed aside thick mats of moss, checking for hollows beneath. Korin crouched low, brushing away leaves to search for cracks in the soil or signs of old boards, anything that hinted at a shaft or man-made passage.

"Nothing here," Ardan called, emerging from behind a stand of twisted birches.

Cyra swore softly. "Every stone looks like the last. Could be a hundred hiding places and we'd still miss the right one."

"We'll keep looking," Indra said firmly, though her voice had a tremor. "He's tough. He'll hold on."

Another search near a moss-choked boulder yielded nothing but damp earth and beetles scattering from the light. Korin slammed his fist against the rock, frustration etched across his face. "It's like the forest swallowed him whole."

They regrouped by the trail, breaths heavy, faces streaked with sweat and dirt. The shadows had grown longer, the dim light turning the forest into a maze of gray and green.

"We're losing the day," Ardan said reluctantly. "If we can't find a way in from here, we need to move. Maybe there's another entrance further along."

It was a bitter choice, but in the end, they shouldered their packs again and stepped back onto the path, the hole in the earth still gaping behind them, silent and dark. After a few steps they stood before a larger puddle of water.

Before anyone could test the water, it rose. The placid surface bulged and split apart, rising in a slow, alien lift, droplets spinning away as a glistening, shapeless mass reared up from the ground. The pond itself seemed to have come alive, pulling free of the ground, edges dripping and curling into questing tendrils. The stench was faint but foul, a metallic tang that spoke of rot beneath the water.

Ardan reacted instantly. His fingers traced burning sigils in the air, his voice cutting sharply across the clearing. A roaring sphere of fire exploded into existence above the creature, slamming down with a hiss like a thousand serpents. Steam burst upward in a choking cloud as boiling droplets spattered the party.

The mimic did not retreat. With a wet slap and an unnatural speed, it surged forward, lashing at Indra in a cresting wave. The water closed over her like a living net, striking with such force that she staggered back, half-toppled. Cold, suffocating pressure wrapped around her throat and chest, and for a terrifying instant, she felt the pull of something trying to pour itself into her mouth and nose.

But Indra was no stranger to being in an enemy's grasp. She wrenched her bow free even as the slick mass clung to her, string creaking as she drew. Her first arrow sank deep into the mimic's shifting body, tearing a bubbling hole through which filthy water poured. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the icy grip on her limbs, and loosed again — this time driving the shaft

straight through what passed for its center. The arrow vanished inside, and the mimic let out a hollow, gurgling shriek, shuddering from the impact.

Cyra stepped forward, hands raised. Arcane darts of glowing force streaked from his fingertips, each missile striking the writhing water with a concussive thump, splashing chunks of its body into the grass.

Korin, circling wide, took careful aim and loosed his arrow. The shot zipped low, tearing through one of the mimic's extended tendrils, splitting it in two. The severed piece flopped to the earth before melting into harmless, thin puddles that seeped away into the soil.

The mimic shuddered again, retreating a half-step — if a creature without legs could be said to step — its form destabilizing as holes, burns, and arrows riddled its mass. Steam still curled from the fire-scorched portions, and the air was thick with the reek of scalded, brackish water.

With a final heave, its form collapsed. The shapeless body broke apart into hundreds of small rivulets that streamed away into the grass, leaving behind only wet soil and the faint metallic smell of its passing.

Indra staggered free, coughing and dripping. "By the gods," she muttered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, "I'll never look at a puddle the same way again."

The others chuckled grimly, though their eyes stayed on the clearing. In a world where even water could rise to choke you, laughter came edged with wariness.

The air still smelled faintly of the strange creature's remains when the party resumed their slow, weary search. The forest floor was damp underfoot, their boots sinking into moss and soft soil as they scoured the ground for any sign of an entrance. Half an hour passed in strained silence, save for the occasional call of a distant crow.

Then Korin's voice broke through. "Here are markings!"

They gathered around him to see a flat, weather-worn stone set partly into the earth. Carved into its surface was an intricate pattern—a half moon above the antlers of a deer, the lines still sharp despite their age.

Indra crouched, running her fingers over the grooves. "This is old work. Very old. Could be a marker, or a ward… or a warning. Maybe there is entrance nearby, but I don`t see anything."

"Could be all three," Cyra muttered, glancing at the surrounding trees.

They sat near the stone for a moment, catching their breath, the weight of exhaustion and hopelessness heavy on their shoulders. Ardan spoke quietly. "If this is nothing, we might never see Gundur again."

Korin's jaw tightened. "Damn this forest," he growled suddenly, leaning back and kicking his boots hard against the ground.

There was a dull, grinding sound. The stone beneath them shifted—not much, but enough for a thin line of blackness to open along one side. Korin scrambled to his feet, eyes wide. "Did you see that? There's a hollow underneath!"

Adrenaline cutting through their fatigue, the others rose as well. Together they pressed their hands to the cool stone and heaved. The weight fought them at first, but with grunts and strained breaths, they managed to push it aside, inch by inch, until it rolled free with a deep, scraping rumble.

Beneath, a square opening yawned, framed in ancient stonework. A narrow staircase led down into darkness, the steps worn smooth with age.

Indra peered into the shadows, her voice low but certain. "This must be the entrance to the underground tunnels."

Ardan's hand went to the hilt of her blade. "Then that's where Gundur is. Or what's left of him."

Cyra struck flint to steel, the torch in his hand flaring to life and casting a wavering orange glow down the stairwell. "Only one way to find out."

Korin adjusted his pack, giving one last glance at the forest around them. "Let's go get him."

One by one, they descended the cold stone steps, the light from the forest fading until there was only the flicker of Cyra's torch. The smell of earth and age grew stronger with each step, the air heavier, as they stepped into the unknown.

The tunnel was close and oppressive, its low ceiling forcing them to stoop. The air was thick with the damp reek of stone and mold, every sound muffled by the heavy earth pressing in on all sides. Indra walked ahead, bow in hand, her eyes scanning the shadows beyond the flickering light of Cyra's torch. The others followed in a loose line, boots crunching over grit and loose pebbles.

Then, ahead, a faint scraping. Shapes moved in the dark — hunched, wrong, with eyes catching the light like dull coins. As they stepped closer into view, the details emerged: human-sized rats, five of them, their patchy fur slicked back in clumps, mismatched chain and leather armor hanging loosely from their wiry frames. Rusted swords and jagged knives glinted in their paws. The stench hit next — a blend of rot, sour wine, and the unwashed stink of bodies that had forgotten sunlight.

One hissed, the sound sharp as tearing parchment, and the rest fanned out, claws scraping stone.

The sudden movement startled Cyra. His torch slipped from his hand, tumbling end over end before clattering onto the tunnel floor. It rolled to a stop against the wall, casting long, jittering shadows over the curved stone as the fight began.

An arrow whistled past Gundur's shoulder before anyone else could move. Indra's first shot buried itself in the chest of the lead rat, spinning it backward with a squeal. She turned, loosing a second arrow that slammed into another, the shaft jutting from its side.

The Cryon Rats surged forward. One barreled into Ardan's flank, grinning, blade scraping against his robes and opening a shallow cut. Another croaked and lunged at Cyra, its sword flashing in the torchlight, but the dwarf sidestepped, the blow hissing past his ear. The clanging of steel and squeals of fury filled the narrow passage.

Ardan thrust out a hand, arcane words spilling from his lips. A roaring globe of fire bloomed in the center of the rat pack, searing fur and flesh. The heat blasted down the tunnel, filling it with the stink of scorched hair. Several rats staggered, screeching, while one collapsed outright, smoking.

Cyra answered in kind, his own fireball blooming hotter and brighter, a burst of crimson and gold that made the shadows leap. Armor blackened and cracked, and one rat's weapon fell from its blistered hands as it collapsed to the floor.

Korin's arrow sang out, catching a wounded rat in the neck, spinning it into the wall before it crumpled lifeless. But the last of the vermin was still on its feet, scorched and bleeding. It hissed a final curse in a language none of them understood before Indra's arrow struck it squarely in the chest. The rat sagged against the stone, its blade clattering to the ground before it joined its kin in the dust.

The tunnel fell quiet except for the party's ragged breathing. The torch still burned low against the wall, casting its restless light over the fallen, the glint of metal in their patchwork armor catching the glow. Indra stepped forward and kicked one of the corpses aside.

“Ugly things,” she muttered. “And that smell’s going to follow us for days.”

No one disagreed.

Snarling footpads of the underroads — the Cryon Rats, human-sized, armor-rattling, blade-flashing vermin with a hunger for coin and conflict. These aren't mere beasts or savage creatures — they are bandits, grinning and dangerous, with crude honor and sharper daggers. The Cryon Rats are a menace to all travelers and a persistent plague along trade roads, tunnels, and forgotten borderlands.

Cryon Rats are believed to have emerged from the depths of human ruin — city slums, battlefield grave-mounds, or collapsed keeps where men and vermin once fed side by side. But they’ve evolved. Standing upright, fully clothed in tattered chain and stained leathers, wielding sharp, fast blades, and filled with crude ambition, they are now organized, armed, and utterly self-serving.

Each Cryon Rat has a taste for metal and blood, and their loyalty is only to their own burrow-brood, a shifting gang bound by hunger, booze, and the thrill of an ambush. While their armor is rusted and ill-fitting, their movements are swift, and their tactics dirty — they don’t fight fair, they fight to win.

They craft and drink Ratgrot, a fermented herbal sludge distilled in buried clay pots. It smells like vinegar-soaked meat and gives them a hard edge in battle — making them rash, aggressive, but unpredictable.

Cryon Rats live underground, burrowing elaborate dens beneath roads, bridges, or ruins. Their tunnels lead to stash pits, sleeping heaps, and hidden Ratgrot stills. These dens may contain hoarded weapons, stolen goods, and even bones of those who resisted their "tax."

Above ground, they ambush wagons, harass lone travelers, or infiltrate camps pretending to be beggars or scouts. When night falls, their howls can be heard echoing in drainage tunnels or forested valleys.

A typical raiding party consists of 3–6 Cryon Rats, with one acting as the “Skullcap” — their term for a leader, usually the drunkest and most vicious of the lot. Despite their crude ways, they often strike with strategy, cutting off escape routes and leaving no survivors if they think someone’s seen their faces.

They fear fire and wolves, and will often abandon a raid if a flaming weapon is brandished or loud howling is heard nearby.

Signs of a nearby Cryon Rat den include: scratched rat sigils on trees or stones, fermented stench in the air, and clawed drag marks across dirt roads.

The tunnel seemed to swallow sound, the only noise the steady drip of water somewhere ahead and the muted shuffle of their boots on the uneven ground. The floor sloped sharply in places, slick with damp earth, and more than once Indra caught herself against the wall as her

foot slid unexpectedly. Cyra's torchlight danced over jagged roots that hung from the ceiling and jutted from the walls, casting twisted shadows that shifted with every step.

They came upon a wider chamber, the stench hitting them before the sight of it. It was the Cryon rats' den—now eerily empty. A half-broken wooden chest slumped against one wall, its lid askew to reveal a jumble of dust-caked tin mugs, moth-eaten cloth scraps, and brittle strips of leather tangled in cobwebs. Nearby, a rough-hewn table was littered with makeshift playing cards and a few cracked mugs filled with a thick, greenish sludge.

Korin picked one up and sniffed it, then grimaced. "Ratgrot," he muttered. "Fermented weeds, rotting in their own filth. Smells like someone bottled regret."

In the corner, several rusted swords lay piled together, their edges pitted and useless. Beyond them, a scattering of bones gleamed pale in the torchlight—human, by the look of them.

Ardan's jaw tightened. "They've taken more than just Gundur."

No one replied. They left the chamber behind, following the downward slope of another tunnel. Here the walls closed in, the packed dirt shored up with crude timbers in places, while in others thick roots burst through, curling like fingers in the dim light.

"These tunnels… most of them were dug by the rats themselves," Cyra said quietly. "That means they could go anywhere."

"Or nowhere," Indra said, brushing cobwebs from her face. "We could be walking in circles for all we know."

Korin adjusted his grip on his bow, his voice low but tight. "There might be more of them ahead. We don't have time to get lost. Gundur's down here somewhere—we need to move faster."

"And if rushing gets us ambushed again?" Ardan countered. "We'll all end up like those bones back there."

"Better than wasting the day wandering in the dark," Korin shot back.

Indra exhaled sharply. "Arguing isn't going to find him. Let's keep moving and watch for signs—anything that tells us which way they took him."

Cyra nodded, raising the torch higher. "Quiet now. If the rats are still here, they've heard us already."

The flicker of light caught the glisten of damp walls and the jagged edges of branching tunnels ahead. Each opening was just another mouth in the earth, and somewhere beyond one of them, Gundur might still be breathing—or not at all.

Gundur stirred on the cold, damp ground, the world above him nothing but a memory of blinding pain and the sudden tearing away of earth beneath his feet. His head pounded like a

drum, every throb sending a sharp ache through his temples. The air down here was heavy, stale, laced with the smell of rot and wet fur.

He blinked slowly, his vision swimming into focus. A low tunnel stretched in both directions, packed earth shored up with rough timbers. The pit he had fallen through opened into the tunnel itself, as though the floor above had been waiting for him to break it. His limbs felt leaden, and his back burned from the impact.

Muffled sounds began to drift toward him—guttural syllables in a tongue he did not know, echoing off the tunnel walls. The voices grew louder, and soon their owners emerged from the shadows: seven Cryon rats, each as tall as a man, their yellowed teeth flashing in the flickering light of a crude lantern one carried.

One of them, its eyes red and unfocused, stepped forward. In halting, drunken human speech it slurred, “Who’s… that little shit… lying here?”

Before he could even form a retort, rough hands—no, claws—were on him. They wrenched his arms behind his back, tying them tight with coarse rope that bit into his wrists. His legs were bound next, and then they dragged him through the dirt like a sack of grain, his boots catching on roots and loose stones.

They hauled him into a low, wider chamber—one of their bunker rooms. The reek here was worse: unwashed fur, spoiled food, and the acrid tang of spilled drink. Without ceremony, they tossed him into a corner where he landed hard on his side.

Clawed paws struck him across the face, the blows snapping his head back. A deep scratch burned across his cheek, warm blood trickling down to his beard. One rat leaned close enough for him to smell the sour stench of its breath before sinking jagged teeth into his forearm. Pain shot up to his shoulder, the world flashing white for a moment. A second bite tore at his calf before they finally lost interest in their sport. One rat started to scavenge through his backpack, tearing out food and eating it right there.

Then the rats gathered around a makeshift wooden table at the center of the room. One poured thick mead from a clay pot into battered mugs; another sharpened a chipped short sword with slow, deliberate strokes. A half-burned candle guttered in a pool of its own wax as it was set between them, casting jagged shadows over their hunched shapes. They spoke in their own rapid, hissing tongue, laughter breaking through now and again as they drank.

Gundur lay still, his breathing shallow. The ropes chafed with every shift of his weight. His arm throbbed where the teeth had sunk in, and the scratch across his face stung with each beat of his heart.

Where are they? he thought, forcing himself to keep his eyes half-lidded. Are they even still looking?

He tried to focus, to keep his mind from drifting. If I'm to get out of here, I'll need a chance. One slip, one mistake on their part, and I'll take it. But… damn, my head feels like it's been split in two. How long have I been down here?

A flicker of dread crept in despite his stubbornness. If they don't find me soon… these rats will finish the job. And no one will know where to dig for my bones.

He clenched his jaw, tasting blood. No. I've come through worse. If I can keep breathing, I can keep fighting.

But as the rats roared with laughter over some private joke, and the candle burned lower, Gundur couldn't help but wonder if the forest had swallowed him for good.

The torchlight behind them cast a faint glow over the damp tunnel walls, roots curling like skeletal fingers from above. Their boots made almost no sound on the soft earth, the air thick with the scent of soil and decay.

After what felt like a long, directionless half hour, a faint glimmer caught Korin's eye from the right—a soft, flickering light seeping through a narrow crack in the tunnel wall. He stopped abruptly, raising a clenched fist. The others froze where they stood, watching him.

He moved forward in a crouch, pressing close to the wall. The light was warmer now, steady in its flicker. Low voices filtered through—the guttural, hissing cadence of the Cryon rats.

Korin waved the others closer, keeping his bow low but ready. Cyra set the torch carefully on the floor, the flame casting shadows over their tense faces. They edged toward the sound, slow and quiet.

At the jagged mouth of a side passage, Korin dropped to a knee, peering inside. The smell of mead and unwashed fur rolled over him. In the far corner, Gundur sat bound, bruised, blood on his face. Around a rough table, seven Cryon rats sat drinking and muttering in their harsh tongue, weapons and scraps of armor scattered about.

He slid back to the others, his voice dropping to a near-breath. "He's in there. Corner of the room. Seven of them, all armed."

Indra's eyes narrowed. "Seven's a lot in close quarters. We need Gundur fighting with us, otherwise we may not win this."

Korin nodded. "Agreed. If we go in swinging without him free, they'll cut us down before we can blink."

Ardan leaned close. "How do we get him loose without them noticing?"

Cyra's lips curved faintly. "Good news is, they haven't stripped him. He's still got his gear. I can see his sword on his belt. Means if someone gets him untied, he can fight right away."

Korin tapped his bowstring. "I could drop the first two before they even stand. But after that…"

“They’ll be on us,” Indra finished.

“Which means,” Ardan whispered, “we need to hit them from two sides. Korin, you and I take the entry. Cyra—maybe you slip around if there’s another opening. Cut Gundur loose.”

Cyra shook his head. “I didn’t see another entrance on the way here, but there might be one deeper. Risky. I could try a distraction—fling something burning into the room, force them toward the door.”

Korin glanced toward Indra. “And you?”

“I’ll shield Gundur the second he’s free,” she said softly. “If we keep him alive for the first minute, we can turn the fight.”

There was a pause as the muffled laughter of the rats echoed through the crack in the wall. Korin’s grip tightened on his bow.

“Alright,” he breathed. “On my first arrow, we move. Cyra—fire in the room if you can. Indra, you stick to Gundur. Ardan, you’re with me in the door. We do this fast, or we don’t do it at all.”

They all gave silent nods, the tension thick as they made ready in the dim glow of the torch.

The moment Cyra, Korin, Ardan and Indra stepped inside, Gundurs gaze sharpened with sudden spark.

The rats turned as one, their yellow teeth bared, claws tightening around rusty swords and chipped daggers. A few hissed in their guttural tongue, the sound echoing in the vaulted room.

Cyra didn’t hesitate. With a guttural incantation and a thrust of his hands, a sphere of flame roared into existence in the center of their table. The explosion lit the entire room in an instant, the table splintering apart as heat and force threw several rats backward. Fur sizzled, armor glowed, and screams rose over the ringing in the party’s ears.

Through the flickering haze, Korin loosed an arrow that took one burned rat in the chest, spinning it into the wall. The creature’s sword clanged to the floor as it slid down, hissing its last breath.

One of the larger rats — black-furred, half-drunk, eyes glazed — lunged at Korin but stumbled, its blow skidding harmlessly off his armor. Another hurled a dagger across the room; the blade grazed Indra’s arm, drawing a hiss from her as she steadied her bow.

Indra fired back, her first arrow deflecting off a rat’s mismatched chestplate, the second finding its mark in the side of a wounded foe. The creature doubled over, wheezing, but somehow stayed upright.

The rats surged in, their movements erratic and furious. A blade clipped Ardan’s shoulder; another rat tried to rush Cyra, only to be met with the dwarf’s staff raised in defiance.

Then Ardan struck. His voice rose above the chaos, summoning a roaring inferno that bloomed from the center of the mob. The rats were hurled against the walls, their shrieks echoing down the tunnel beyond. Smoke and the smell of burnt fur filled the air, and when the fire died, four bodies lay still.

Only two of the vermin still moved — both blackened, breathing in ragged gasps.

Indra sprinted toward Gundur, arrows still dangling from her quiver. She slashed at his ropes, but before she could finish, one of the surviving rats leapt at her, sword raised high. Its blade rang harmlessly off the stone pillar as she ducked.

That was all the opening Cyra needed. Three streaks of magical force shot from his fingertips, each hitting the rat like a hammer. It crumpled, smoking, at Indra's feet.

Korin's arrow flew at the last one — pinning it clean through the chest to the floorboards. Its weapon clattered away, and the fight was over.

Gundur stepped free of the post, rolling his shoulders and flexing his scorched, rope-burned wrists. His face was blackened by fireball blasts, but his grin was unmistakable, although he was wounded.

"Took you long enough, if you are going to cast fireballs one more time inside a room I am in, I will impale you" he growled, stomping a dead rat's head flat as he walked past. Korin said "A thank you for saving me would be nice."

The chamber fell silent save for the soft hiss of dying embers, the smell of charred wood and fur hanging heavy in the stale air.

The reek of blood, mead, and unwashed fur still clung to the air as they stepped over the bodies of the slain Cryon rats. Korin knelt first, checking pouches and belts, and soon they had a small pile of coin—twenty gold in all. In the far corner, behind the overturned table, Indra pried open a wooden chest that creaked in protest. Inside lay another thirty gold, forty silver, and a silver cup that gleamed faintly even in the guttering torchlight.

"Well," Korin muttered, dropping the last coins into his pouch, "at least the bastards were worth something."

With Gundur freed and steady on his feet—though still battered—they left the room behind. Korin retrieved the torch from where Cyra had left it on the tunnel floor, the flame licking low but steady. They retraced their steps, turning through passages that seemed far less menacing now that they'd survived them.

After half an hour of twisting corridors and careful navigation, the familiar stone steps rose before them. They climbed, pushing aside the heavy stone slab until daylight spilled in. One by one they emerged into the forest's cool air, the oppressive smell of the tunnels fading into the scent of moss and damp leaves.

Cyra pulled a waterskin from his belt and handed it to Gundur. He drank deep, then splashed water over his face, the blackened scorch marks washing into muddy rivulets down his beard.

“Bloody hell,” he grumbled, rubbing at his cheek. “I’ll say this again, and I’ll say it loud—never—and I mean never—throw a fireball when your own man’s in the room. You hear me?”

Ardan lifted an eyebrow. “It was that or have three more of them gnawing your head off.”

“Head off, aye—but you near burned the beard off my face!” Gundur shot back. He turned to Cyra. “And you—two fireballs! Was one not enough to roast me? You trying to see if I taste better than those rats?”

Cyra held up his hands. “It was controlled—”

“Controlled?!” Gundur barked. “Controlled is when you don’t set your ally on fire. I could smell my own bloody hair cooking. I’ve got burns in places I don’t even want to talk about. But…”—his tone softened, just a little—“I’m alive, so I suppose I’ll forgive you. Eventually.”

They made their way back to the road, the forest beginning to thin. After another half hour, they found a small clearing with signs of old campfires—flat ground, sheltered from the wind by a ring of stones and low shrubs.

Korin set down his pack and began pitching one of the tents, while Indra and Gundur worked on the other. Ardan struck flint to steel, coaxing a small fire to life as Cyra unpacked bread, dried meat, and a wedge of hard cheese. Soon the smell of woodsmoke filled the air, the flames licking higher as night began to fall.

When the tents were up, they sat together around the fire. Korin tamped down the bowl of his pipe, lit it, and exhaled a slow stream of fragrant smoke into the cool night. Gundur sipped some healing potion and let his burning wounds heal.

“Feels better up here,” Indra said quietly, gazing into the fire.

“No argument there,” Korin replied. “Though I think Gundur’s right—we’ll be giving the fireballs a bit more space from now on.”

Ardan smirked. “Next time we’ll send them in first.”

“Next time,” Gundur grunted, “I’ll stay above ground.” But a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he leaned back against his bedroll.

They talked a while longer—about the road ahead, about the strange carvings on the stone they’d found, about how the forest seemed to watch them when they walked its paths. The fire burned low, and one by one they slipped into their tents, the murmurs fading to the steady rhythm of breathing, leaving the night to the quiet crackle of embers.

The Glimwood seemed endless, every tree older than the last, their trunks rising like pillars of some vast and forgotten temple. The party pressed on, their boots sinking into moss that seemed never to dry, the air still and damp, heavy with the scent of earth and leaf mold. Mist curled low across the ground, and the light that filtered down through the canopy came dim and green, as if the sun itself feared to pierce this place. Their voices grew hushed without thought, for something about the forest compelled quiet.

Hours passed with only the crunch of boots and the occasional creak of leather straps breaking the silence. Then, without warning, the hush deepened. Birds that had been calling in the distance went silent, and even the buzzing of insects seemed to fade. Indra, attuned to such shifts, raised her hand. “Something is near,” she whispered.

The first figure they saw was not man, nor beast, but something between: a tall being draped in gray rags, crowned with a circlet of wild herbs and twisted thorns. In one hand he bore a staff carved from a single length of oak wood, blackened and scarred as though by lightning. His face was calm, his eyes steady, holding in them the weight of centuries.

He stood motionless at first, as though waiting for the wind to approve his speech. Then, when all was still, he spoke in a voice like rustling leaves. “Travelers in Glimwood. You walk beneath an old canopy. Few find their way here. Fewer still are meant to.”

The party stood frozen for a moment, uncertain. Then Ardan stepped forward cautiously, one hand on the hilt of her sword. “We are only passing through. We mean no harm.”

The druid inclined his head slightly. “I am the one they call the Druid of Old. The forest chose me, long before your kind stepped into these woods. I am no enemy to those who come with open hands.”

As he spoke, shapes emerged from the mist around him—strange, humanoid figures, but their forms were of living fungus. One was tall and stooped, its mushroom cap curved wide like a parasol, spore-thread limbs moving with surprising grace. Another bore hardened growths like armor, its hand gripping a blade of obsidian bound in vines. Their eyes glimmered faintly, but their silence was filled with presence.

Indra whispered, barely audible, “Mycalun… and Mycalith.”

The druid smiled faintly, as though he had overheard. “You know their names, then. These are Blightguards and Grovewardens. The forest grew them in its time of need, when balance faltered. They are not men, nor beasts, but stewards, as I am. They dwell where the world forgets itself—deep roots, hidden groves, ruined stones swallowed by ivy. They do not conquer, they do not plunder. They endure.”

The Mycalun Blightguards shifted slightly, their spore-root blades glinting faintly. Though their stance was wary, there was no malice in their movements. The Mycalith Grovewardens stood still as trees, their slow breaths releasing faint puffs of spores that glowed briefly in the dim light before fading.

“Will you come with me?” the Druid of Old asked after a moment. “I would not have you wandering paths that shift and deceive. My dwelling is near—a hollow of stone and moss. There, we can share tea brewed of leaves older than your lineages, and I will tell you what the forest whispers.”

Korin exchanged a look with the others. “What do you think?” he murmured.

Cyra leaned on his staff. “This one isn’t like the spirits or beasts we’ve met. His presence feels… different. Like the forest bends toward him.”

Ardan gave a slight nod. “If he wanted us gone, we’d already be bones under moss.”

Gundur, still stiff from his wounds, growled softly. “If he’s offering tea, I’ll take it. Better than more Ratgrot.”

The druid lifted his staff, not as a weapon but as a guide, and turned toward the deeper green. The Blightguards and Grovewardens moved with him, silent shadows of living fungus. The party followed, the path ahead opening as though the forest itself parted to allow them through.

Thus began their walk toward the druid’s hidden dwelling, the weight of mystery pressing upon them, yet softened by the sense that—for the first time in many days—they were not walking into danger, but into wisdom.

The path the druid led them on was unlike the wild animal trails and twisting game paths they had followed so far. Here, the forest floor grew soft with moss so thick it felt like stepping

across a green carpet, and the air was filled with a faint, pleasant dampness as though rain had just passed, though the canopy above remained dry. Flowers they did not know bloomed in small clusters near fallen logs, glowing faintly in the dimness, their petals trembling though no wind stirred.

The Druid of Old walked ahead with measured steps, his ragged cloak brushing the moss. The wreath of herbs and bone-thorns on his head gave him a strange majesty, as if the forest had crowned him in its own way. His staff tapped lightly against the earth, but the sound was less a knock and more a heartbeat, as if the wood still lived and resonated with the rhythm of roots.

The Mycalun Blightguards flanked him, moving with heavy, deliberate strides. Their fungal bodies swayed faintly, spores drifting from them in faint clouds whenever their shoulders brushed branches. One carried a spore-root blade across its back, its obsidian edge glinting with an oily sheen. Another's cap was ridged and scarred, like bark peeled from a lightning-struck tree.

Behind them came the Mycalith Grovewardens. They were slower, their caps wide and heavy, their limbs long and strangely graceful despite the woven moss and bark-flesh that made their bodies. Each step they took left faint traces of phosphorescent spores in the air, hanging like fireflies before dissolving into nothing.

The party followed in silence, each lost in thought. It was Indra who broke it at last. "I've heard of the Mycalun before. Old druidic songs speak of fungal guardians, protectors of balance. I never thought I'd see them walking."

The druid glanced back, his eyes glinting like dark pools under the canopy. "Songs remember what men forget. The Mycalun live where water feeds the roots and fog lingers, for they are children of dampness and shadow. They draw life from moisture, and when the air is dry, their steps falter."

Ardan frowned. "Strange allies for a man alone."

"They are not my allies," the druid corrected gently. "They are of the forest, as I am. We are stewards of the same balance. When fire rises, they quench it. When blight comes, they consume it. When axe falls, they stand before the tree. And so, when you met me, you met them, for we are bound."

Cyra tilted his head, eyes lingering on one of the Mycalith Grovewardens as it passed close. "And the Mycalith?"

The druid's lips curved faintly. "Ancient. Older than even I remember. Once, druids in forgotten ages called upon the deep spores to awaken guardians. They wished to preserve their groves, and from those rites rose the Mycalith—peaceful keepers, bound to protect the sanctity of life. They fight only when peace is broken, for their oath is harmony."

The forest grew darker as they went, the air cooler. Ahead, through the thick boles of trees, a faint light appeared—a soft green glow, pulsing gently like the heart of the woods itself. The druid raised his staff and said, “We have arrived.”

They stepped into a hollowed glade, ringed by stones overgrown with moss and ivy. A great oak, blackened and hollow at its base, rose in the center, and from its roots grew a natural shelter—part hut, part tree, part cavern of moss. Strange runes, weathered by time, marked the stones around it, and streams of water trickled through channels cut long ago, feeding small pools where lilies bloomed.

The druid turned and spread a hand. “Welcome. The forest has offered me this place, and so I offer it to you, as guests. Here no blade may be drawn without cause. Sit, and drink with me.”

From within the hollow came the faint smell of herbs, sharp and soothing, like sage and mint crushed together. A low fire glowed inside, smoke curling upward into cracks in the tree. The Mycalun and Mycalith stood at the edges of the clearing, watching in silence, their presence solemn but not hostile.

The party exchanged glances. Then, slowly, one by one, they followed the druid into the hollow, the weight of the journey giving way to an unexpected calm, as if they had stepped into the beating heart of the Glimwood itself.

The hollow within the oak was unlike any place they had ever entered. The walls were alive with moss and lichen, the bark smooth where hands had brushed it over countless years. Shelves of stone and root jutted naturally from the sides, lined with bundles of drying herbs, carved wooden bowls, and vessels of clay. A faint glow came from fungal caps clustered in

corners, giving the chamber a steady, soothing light that did not flicker like flame but pulsed gently, in rhythm with unseen life.

At the center, a low fire burned in a pit of stones, the smoke rising into a hollow channel in the tree's heart. Over it, a pot simmered, releasing the sharp fragrance they had smelled outside—a mingling of sage, nettle, and mint, with undertones of something wilder, resinous and sweet.

The Druid of Old lowered himself to a mat of woven reeds, motioning the party to sit as well. "The forest gives what it will," he said softly. "I gather leaves when the dew is young, roots when the sun is low, and bark when lightning fells the branch. In these, wisdom sleeps, waiting to be woken by fire and water. You may drink and share that wisdom, if you wish."

Indra, curious, leaned closer to the pot. "It smells… alive."

"It is," the druid replied. He reached with a wooden ladle and filled rough clay cups, setting them before each of the companions. The liquid within was greenish-gold, steaming, and small fragments of leaf floated in the surface like drifting stars.

Gundur lifted his cup, sniffed, and muttered, "Smells like boiled moss." Still, he took a sip and blinked. "Hells, that's not bad. Bit sharp, but warms the gut."

Cyra inhaled deeply before drinking, savoring the aroma. "I feel like it goes straight to the bones," he murmured.

The druid watched them with eyes calm as still water. "Herbs speak in silence. They do not boast like men, nor whisper like spirits. They simply are. And yet, if you listen, they teach. The nettle stings, but it heals what burns. The oak falls, but its wood shelters. Even the humble mushroom, damp and unseen, can restore life—or end it."

At this, one of the Mycalun Blightguards entered, its heavy steps silent despite its bulk. It carried a shallow bowl filled with damp earth, within which small glowing fungi sprouted. The creature placed it reverently beside the druid and released a faint cloud of spores that glimmered briefly before vanishing.

"These are my companions," the druid said, gesturing. "The Mycalun live in groves cloistered from the world. They are born not of womb, but of spore and soil. In their kind there is no 'I', for they share thought through spores, as you share words. Memory, feeling, intent—these pass among them as mist over water. Alone, they are one being. Together, they are the forest's mind."

Korin tilted his head, studying the Blightguard. "So when one feels pain…"

"All feel it," the druid finished. "And when one learns, all learn. A cut to their flesh is mended by growth, the same as a tree seals its wounds. They wield blades of root hardened by ritual, obsidian bound with vine—not forged, but grown. And their spores can heal, if tended rightly."

The Mycalun bowed its mushroom-capped head slightly, as though in agreement, then stepped back into the shadows.

Ardan shifted uncomfortably. “And the others—the taller ones?”

The druid’s gaze lingered toward the glade outside, where the silhouettes of the Mycalith Grovewardens stood unmoving among the trees. “The Mycalith are older still. When druids of forgotten ages feared their groves would fall to axe and fire, they called upon deep spores with rites now half-remembered. From the soil rose the Mycalith, woven from moss and bark-thread, their caps shaped by the seasons. They live to guard peace. Violence is not their nature, but should the balance be broken, even their patience can turn to storm.”

Cyra’s eyes gleamed with scholarly interest. “And their society?”

“They form circles, always in the clearings, by waters that feed life. Each grove has a Peace Stone—a fungal monolith, bound by oath. As long as that stone stands, they will protect the life around it. Not through conquest, but through harmony.”

Silence filled the hollow for a while as the party absorbed his words. The tea warmed their hands and bellies, and the strangeness of the forest felt less threatening in this space.

At last, Indra set her cup down, her voice hushed. “You carry the stillness of centuries. But why live alone, when your words could guide many?”

The druid gave a faint smile. “I live not alone. I live with the forest. And those who need wisdom will find it, as you have. To seek a crown is to hunger. To walk with roots is to serve.”

His words hung in the air, slow and steady, like the growth of moss on stone.

The hollow seemed to breathe with them as they sat, the faint glow of the fungal caps shifting in hue from pale green to soft gold. Outside, the muffled sounds of the forest reached them only as echoes—the distant drip of water, the rustle of unseen creatures moving through underbrush. Here, within the druid's dwelling, time felt slower, as though the hours had thickened like resin, dripping one moment at a time.

The druid reached for a small wooden box, carved with symbols that looked less like runes and more like the patterns of vines crawling over stone. He opened it carefully, revealing bundles of herbs bound with reed twine. Some were common enough—lavender, rosemary, dried nettle—but others were alien to the party, their leaves curled in unnatural shapes, their colors deep and strange, glowing faintly in the dim.

"These are my companions," he said softly, laying them on the mat before him. "Each leaf, each root, each spore—none without purpose. Some heal flesh, others mind. Some shield from poison, others bring dreams. All are teachers. I speak their names when I cut them, and they answer with their gifts."

Cyra leaned forward, his scholarly hunger lighting his eyes. "Do you write them down?"

The druid gave a small nod. "The forest records itself, in bark and stone, in the songs of birds and the fall of water. But I keep what is forgotten by men, here." He tapped a leather-bound book, its cover stiff with age, edges stained by years of damp fingers and pressed leaves.

"May I?" Cyra asked.

The druid studied him for a long moment, then handed the book across. Cyra opened it with care, pages heavy and filled with neat ink script. Interspersed were pressed plants, some crumbling, others preserved perfectly by resin. Hand-drawn sketches filled the margins, capturing each vein, stem, and cap in painstaking detail.

He read aloud from one page: "Goldenstem, grows where water drips from stone, stem coiled like a serpent. Brewed in tea, it calms tremors of hand and heart. Oversteeped, it closes the throat." He glanced up, his brow furrowed. "It's… extraordinary."

Indra reached across to brush her fingers over one page that held a pressed violet flower, its center a deep, unnatural black. "There's beauty here too," she murmured.

The druid inclined his head. "Beauty and peril are one. To see one without the other is to misunderstand both."

Gundur grunted, sipping the last of his tea. "Aye, well, I'll stick to roots that make the belly full, myself."

The druid's eyes, calm as still ponds, turned to him. "Even hunger teaches. The forest fills and empties, the same as men. What you call simple is no less sacred."

Ardan, who had remained quiet, finally spoke. “What of the world beyond this forest? Do you never go out to see how it fares?”

The druid’s gaze drifted toward the fire, where flames licked the edges of blackened wood. “The world beyond is loud, restless. Men build and tear down, build and tear down again. They do not listen when the wind pauses. They do not hear the silence between heartbeats. Here, balance is older than any kingdom. I walk here, because the forest remembers what men forget.”

At that, one of the Mycalith Grovewardens stepped inside, its great cap brushing against the roof of the hollow. It bowed its head, releasing a gentle cloud of spores that shimmered faintly before drifting down. The druid gestured toward it. “Even now, they watch. The Grovewardens live for the oath of peace. They do not choose war unless the balance is broken. They are what the world could be, if it did not hunger for dominion.”

The Grovewarden’s slow, deep voice rolled out like stone being moved. “Peace… is our oath.” Its Common was halting, but clear.

The companions sat in quiet reverence, feeling the weight of the presence around them. The fire crackled softly, and for the first time in many days, none of them felt the press of danger at their backs. They were in a place where the forest itself seemed to shelter them, and though questions filled their minds, the stillness of the druid and his companions reminded them that not every answer was meant to be rushed.

The druid refilled their cups and said quietly, “Stay, if you will. The forest has much to show, and patience is the key to hearing it.”

The companions lingered, each cradling the clay cup between their hands as though the warmth within it might pass into their bones. The druid moved with quiet efficiency, adding more herbs to the simmering pot, his movements neither hurried nor sluggish but as steady as the turning of seasons. Every motion felt deliberate, even the way he breathed in time with the fire’s crackle.

For a while none spoke. The silence was not uncomfortable, but heavy in a way that demanded respect, as if they were sitting in a temple not built by men but by roots and soil. Outside, the faint sound of spores drifting from the Mycalun Blightguards reached them—a subtle, almost musical hiss, like sand shifting through an hourglass.

At length, Korin broke the hush. “You said you were chosen. By the forest. What does that mean? You were born a man, weren’t you?”

The druid raised his eyes, their depths steady. “I was born as all men are, crying and helpless. But birth is not choosing. When an ancient glade falls silent, when the last dryad’s tears soak the roots, the forest listens. It listens for those who will kneel, who will hear its grief. I heard. The forest placed a seed in me, not of flesh, but of will. That seed grew, until my own wants no longer mattered. From seed, wisdom. From wisdom, purpose. That is how one becomes the Druid of Old.”

Indra leaned forward, her voice barely above the whisper of the fire. “So you don’t serve a god?”

The druid shook his head. “The gods are many, and their voices are thunderous. The forest’s voice is softer. I serve silence, patience, and balance. I serve what endures when gods grow tired of their games.”

Cyra’s fingers trailed across the pages of the herbal book still open in his lap. “You say wisdom grows like a seed. But does it never falter? Do you never doubt?”

“Doubt is part of growth,” the druid replied without hesitation. “A tree that never bends will snap in storm. A heart that never doubts becomes stone. I have doubted often. I still do. But doubt is a question, not an end. The forest does not give answers. It teaches us to live with the questions.”

There was a deep stillness after his words. Even Gundur, usually the first to grunt or jest, said nothing. His rough hand tightened around the cup, and his eyes—though tired—were thoughtful.

At that moment, one of the Mycalun Blightguards entered, carrying a bowl of liquid that glowed faintly green. It placed the vessel on the ground with a soft thud. The druid gestured toward it. “Spores distilled with spring water. A gift of the Mycalun. When mixed with herbs, it heals. When burned, it drives away sickness. But taken pure, it shows visions. Not all who see return unchanged.”

Korin raised an eyebrow. “And you drink it?”

The druid’s faint smile returned. “Not often. The forest does not waste visions on those who chase them.”

Cyra’s eyes gleamed with curiosity, but he closed the book gently, respecting the boundary in his words.

The Mycalith Grovewarden still stood in the doorway, unmoving as a statue. When it finally spoke, its voice was deep and deliberate, as if shaped by the weight of centuries. “The world beyond… burns. Axes fall. Fire spreads. Yet still… peace is possible.”

The druid nodded. “They see more than we do. The Mycalith were born from rites of druids long past, woven from spore-thread and moss. They do not forget, for their memory is not bound by years as yours is. They keep the oath of the Peace Stone, that no life should be taken without cause. Imagine a people who live forever in harmony with soil and water, and you will glimpse their truth.”

Ardan’s voice was hushed. “And yet the world cuts down forests every day. How do they endure that?”

The druid lifted his staff, its charred wood catching the glow of the fire. “They endure because endurance is their oath. They are patient, even when men are not. But when patience breaks… the forest rises. I have seen it. And it is a thing no axe can fell.”

His words settled like a shadow, not threatening, but reminding them all that the balance he spoke of was not a fragile one. It was older, deeper, and when broken, it struck back.

The fire popped, a spark leaping into the air before fading. None of the companions spoke. Each turned inward, drinking from their cups as though trying to take the druid’s words into themselves, to understand them in ways that words alone could not give.

At last the druid said softly, “You may stay here tonight. The forest watches, and it keeps its own. Sleep, and dream without fear.”

The companions accepted the offer without protest, for weariness clung to their bones like damp cloth. Their journey through Glimwood had been taxing, filled with unease and hardship, and the weight of Gundur’s recent ordeal still lingered in the silence between them. To rest here, in this strange haven woven of oak and moss, felt like laying down their burdens in the lap of something older than time.

The druid spread woven mats of reed and moss across the hollow floor, their texture soft, almost springy underfoot. From a nook in the wall he pulled blankets stitched from deer hide and lined with moss, smelling faintly of pine resin. The Mycalun Blightguards moved with quiet, deliberate steps, placing clay jars of clean water and baskets of dried berries near the mats before fading once more into the night outside.

As the companions settled, Cyra could not keep his curiosity contained. “These creatures of yours, the Mycalun and the Mycalith… Do they dream as we do?”

The druid’s eyes gleamed in the faint glow of the fungal caps. “Dreaming is not the same for all. The Mycalun dream together. Their spores bind them. When one wanders the realm of night, the others follow. They share the same visions, the same fears, the same wonders. As for the Mycalith, their dreams are slower, like stone wearing beneath water. A single dream may last a season. To them, waking and dreaming are not separate things—they drift between both as trees do between growth and rest.”

Indra lay back against the moss mat, her eyes reflecting the glow. “To dream together… to never be alone, even in sleep.” Her voice was wistful, almost envious.

“Yet solitude has its gifts as well,” the druid said, turning his staff so that its charred head rested across his knees. “Aloneness teaches the self. Togetherness teaches the whole. Both are needed for balance.”

Korin, who had been staring into the firepit with his pipe hanging forgotten in his mouth, muttered, “Hells, I’d be glad if someone else could dream my nightmares for me. Had enough of those to last a lifetime.”

The druid studied him but did not press. His silence itself was a kind of balm, a refusal to prod where wounds still bled unseen.

Ardan broke the pause with a question that lingered heavy in her tone. “You’ve lived here long… have you ever seen men come with greed? Axes and flame?”

The druid’s gaze did not waver, but there was iron beneath his calm. “I have. And when the balance is broken, the forest remembers. I do not lift my staff in wrath, for my strength lies elsewhere. But the Mycalun rise, the Mycalith awaken, and the woods themselves turn against those who would defile them. Bramble chokes, roots twist, storms gather. Men forget quickly, but the land does not. Every scar on bark is a memory.”

The fire popped, sending a faint ember spinning upward before it winked out.

Cyra spoke quietly, half to himself. “It must be… a lonely thing. To be chosen. To carry the silence of the forest as your voice.”

The druid turned his calm eyes on him. “Loneliness is not emptiness. To sit alone beneath stars, to drink dew from a leaf, to listen when the wind does not speak—these are not the absence of company, but the presence of truth. Many fear silence. I find in it the forest’s deepest song.”

Gundur grunted, lying back with his hands behind his head. “Hmph. I prefer my songs with a drum and a good mug of ale, myself. Still… can’t say your words don’t put something in the gut.”

A faint smile touched the druid’s weathered face, like moss softening a stone.

The Mycalith Grovewarden, still lingering near the hollow’s entrance, spoke at last in its deep, slow cadence. “Peace… here. Sleep… safe.”

The reassurance, simple though it was, settled like a blanket over the companions. One by one, they stretched out on the mats, the warmth of the fire at their feet, the earthy scent of herbs and moss filling their lungs.

The druid sat motionless, his staff across his lap, his eyes half-closed as though listening to something far beyond hearing. Outside, spores drifted like soft snow, and the forest itself seemed to draw a long breath.

For the first time in many days, the party’s dreams came softly, free of shadow.

Morning in the druid’s hollow was not heralded by the blare of a rooster or the clang of hammers, but by a subtler chorus. Drops of dew slid down mossy walls and struck stone bowls with the clarity of bells. The fungal caps glowed a paler hue, like dawn transmuted into light from beneath the earth. Birds could be heard faintly outside—timid at first, then bolder—as though even their song was mindful not to disturb the peace here.

The companions stirred slowly, each waking to the sensation of deep rest, as though they had slept not just through the night but through weeks of weariness. Gundur stretched and yawned so wide it seemed his jaw might crack, scratching his beard and muttering, “Hells, I don’t remember the last time I slept without waking to sore bones.”

Indra sat up gracefully, her hair falling like dark silk over her shoulders. “It feels as though the forest itself kept watch over us.”

“It did,” the druid said simply, his voice already steady and alert, though he had not moved from his seat by the embers. He looked as if he had not slept at all, yet his gaze held no fatigue, only that same calm depth. “Where balance holds, no shadow dares to linger.”

Ardan inhaled deeply, savoring the clean scent of moss and herbs. “If this place could be carried in a bottle, cities would crumble from envy.”

The druid stirred the pot over the rekindled fire, filling the hollow with the sharp, awakening scent of another brew. “Tea for the road. Strength does not come from the forest alone. It must be carried within.” He poured into their cups again, this time the liquid a paler green, with a faint sweetness.

Cyra took his with a reverent nod. “It tastes like morning distilled,” he said after a sip, eyes half closed.

As they drank, the Mycalun Blightguards entered, their mushroom bodies damp with the morning’s mist. They carried baskets of roots and berries, placing them before the companions. One paused by Korin and tilted its cap, releasing a gentle spore cloud that shimmered briefly before dissolving. Korin chuckled and waved a hand as if fending off a friendly puff of smoke. “Guess that’s their way of saying ‘eat up,’ eh?”

The druid inclined his head. “They share not with words, but with essence. That spore meant gratitude. They remember kindness, even when spoken only in thought.”

Cyra perked up, curiosity sparking again. “If they share memory and intent… then when one sees a face, do all recall it?”

“Yes,” the druid answered. “To harm one is to scar the whole. To befriend one is to be known by all.”

Indra’s eyes softened at that. “Then we are already part of their circle, in some small way.”

The druid gave no answer, but the faintest smile touched his lips, like dawn breaking through branches.

They ate simply—roots roasted in the fire, tart berries that burst with flavor, and fresh water poured into wooden cups. Each bite seemed to carry more than nourishment; it carried the stillness of the place, the patience of soil and leaf.

When the meal ended, the druid finally rose to his full height, staff in hand, the wreath of herbs on his brow catching the faint light. “Your path lies beyond this forest,” he said, his tone neither commanding nor imploring, but matter-of-fact, like the statement of a river flowing downhill. “But before you go, you will see what it means to walk with the old ways.”

He gestured toward the opening of the hollow, where the Mycalith Grovewardens still stood, their massive forms outlined against shafts of filtered morning light. Their caps glistened with dew, and their slow movements carried the weight of ages.

“Come,” the druid said. “The forest remembers, and it wishes you to remember too.”

The companions exchanged glances—some wary, some curious—and rose, gathering their belongings but leaving their guard lowered. For here, in this place, their blades and spells felt unnecessary.

And so, guided by the Druid of Old, they stepped out of the hollow into the deeper glade, where the forest waited to show them more than they had ever thought to seek.

The glade outside the druid’s hollow was unlike any other part of Glimwood the party had seen. It was as though they had stepped not into a forest, but into the memory of one. Trees towered impossibly high, their trunks wide enough that a dozen men could not have circled them hand to hand. Their bark glowed faintly with lichen that shimmered silver in the dim light, and their roots wove across the ground like the backs of sleeping giants. A mist clung low, catching rays of sunlight that filtered down in thin, golden shafts.

The druid walked ahead with a gait both frail and steady, the oak staff tapping against roots and stone. Each tap echoed strangely, as though the earth itself was listening. Beside him drifted two of the Mycalith Grovewardens, their movements slow, deliberate, like the turning of seasons. Their fungal caps swayed as they walked, and every so often one paused, pressing its moss-woven hand against a tree as if exchanging silent words.

The companions followed, subdued, their usual chatter quieted by the weight of the place. Even Gundur, who was rarely awed by anything that didn’t come in a mug, muttered under his breath, “By the Stonefathers… this is no common wood.”

The druid glanced back, his eyes catching a shaft of light. “This is the Glade of Remembrance. It was here that druids first gave voice to the Mycalith. Here, where a thousand years of moss and rot were kindled into song.”

Cyra leaned closer to Indra, whispering with a thrill in his tone, “We stand where sapience was born of ritual.”

Indra nodded, though her own gaze was less scholarly and more reverent, her hand brushing one of the roots as if to feel its pulse.

The druid led them to a clearing where a massive stone sat at the center, covered in fungal growth that pulsed faintly like the slow beat of a heart. The Grovewardens halted and bowed their great caps toward it. The air grew still, as though all sound had been drawn inward.

“This is a Peace Stone,” the druid said, lowering his staff. “Each grove keeps one, a living monolith born of spore and oath. It binds their promise: to protect life, to endure, to maintain harmony. No blade may be raised within its circle without the forest itself remembering.”

Korin tilted his head, brow furrowed. “Remembering? You mean the forest actually… keeps score?”

The druid’s voice was quiet, yet firm. “Every scar upon bark, every footprint in soil, every tear upon moss—it all lingers. The forest does not forget, though men pretend it does. The Peace Stone carries that memory. And those who break its oath carry that weight.”

As if to emphasize the point, the fungal monolith shuddered faintly, spores drifting from its surface in a shimmering veil. The Grovewardens extended their arms, and a shared breath passed between them—a deep, humming exhale that resonated in the bones of those present.

Ardan, usually skeptical, found herself speaking softly. “It’s alive.”

The druid nodded. “All things are. Men are quick to name what breathes and what does not. But the world is not so simple. The stone breathes, in its way. The forest speaks, if you know how to listen. These guardians are proof of that truth.”

For a long while, none of the companions moved. The air was thick with an unseen presence, something vast and ancient that made their own lives feel like sparks against the slow-burning fire of ages.

At last, Gundur broke the silence, scratching his beard. “Well… I’ll say this much. I don’t understand half of it, but it makes my axe arm feel lighter. Like the weight ain’t all on us.”

The druid’s lips curved in the faintest smile. “That is the forest’s gift. To remind you that you are not alone in your burden.”

The companions exchanged glances, each sensing something shift within themselves, though none put words to it. They stood not as intruders here, but as guests, and perhaps—if the druid’s eyes were to be believed—as students.

“Come,” the druid said again, raising his staff. “There is more yet to see, and the forest has chosen to show it while your hearts are open.”

And so they followed deeper into the glade, the Peace Stone’s spores still drifting in their wake, as though blessing their steps.

The forest seemed to deepen with every step, as though the path wound not just through space but through layers of time. The air grew cooler, saturated with the scent of damp earth and resin. Overhead, the canopy was so thick that only narrow beams of sunlight pierced through, painting the ground in shifting patterns. The Mycalun Blightguards accompanied them now, their soft footfalls barely rustling the moss as they glided between tree trunks. Every so often, one released a faint spore cloud that shimmered gold in the filtered light, settling over the undergrowth like dust motes suspended in prayer.

The druid walked in silence for a long while, his staff knocking gently against root and stone. Then he spoke, not looking back at them but to the air itself. “Men think the forest sleeps. They say it grows blindly, thoughtless, as though life itself were only hunger and struggle. But the forest remembers balance. When one tree falls, another rises. When one stream dries, another carves its path. And when men wound it, it does not forget.”

Cyra tilted his head. “That sounds less like wisdom and more like warning.”

“Both,” the druid said simply. “The balance has no malice. When a fire spreads, it does not burn from hatred, but from need. So too does the forest. Those who cut too deep awaken the roots against them, not because the roots seek vengeance, but because they must endure.”

Indra let her fingers drift along the side of a towering cedar, the bark flaking softly beneath her touch. “And you… you speak for it? Like its voice?”

The druid’s gaze flicked toward her briefly. “No voice could hold its breadth. I am not its mouth, only its ear. I listen, and I try to keep its songs from vanishing in the din of axes and wars.”

Ahead, the path widened into a second clearing. Here the ground was soft and wet, a shallow marsh shimmering with reeds and flowering mosses. Strange fungal shapes rose like carved pillars, some of them nearly as tall as men. They glowed faintly, as though embers smoldered within their stalks.

One of the Mycalith Grovewardens stepped forward and pressed its spore-thread hand to one of the fungal pillars. The glow brightened, spreading to the others until the marsh was bathed in a low, steady radiance. The air grew thick with spores that swirled upward like smoke, but instead of choking, the companions felt clarity wash through them, their thoughts sharp, their fatigue dulled.

Korin blinked, his hand tightening on his bow. “What in the Nine is this? Feels like my mind’s been scrubbed clean.”

The druid’s voice carried like wind through reeds. “These are the Glowspires. Formed when the Mycalith first awoke, they are the anchors of their memory. They do not think as you do, nor speak as you do, but they store what they are here, in light and spore. When a Grovewarden dies, its memories are released into these spires. In this way, they are never lost.”

Ardan drew closer, cautious yet awestruck. “So every one of them carries centuries within it? Lives that have no end, just… passed on.”

“Passed on,” the druid agreed. “The Mycalith have no graves. They do not mourn as you mourn. Their sorrow is quiet, their joy shared. They endure, as the Glowspires endure. And in their endurance, the forest keeps its wisdom.”

Gundur spat softly into the moss, though not disrespectfully. “Strange folk. But I’ll say this—better guardians than any army. A man fears what he cannot kill, and you can’t kill memory.”

The druid looked at him, a faint spark in his eyes. “No, you cannot. And perhaps that is why men try so often to burn it.”

The companions stood in the Glowspires’ light for some time, each lost in their own thoughts. Cyra’s fingers itched to write in his spellbook, but he dared not break the spell of silence. Indra closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as though trying to carry the forest’s song inside her chest.

Finally, the druid lifted his staff. “The forest has shown you its roots and its memory. Now it will show you its breath.”

He turned, leading them once more through the misty marsh and back into the towering woods, while behind them the Glowspires dimmed, their light retreating like a dream upon waking.

The path back wound like a serpent, weaving between ancient trunks so wide that they swallowed the light. The companions followed the druid in silence, for words seemed too small for what they had witnessed. Every step carried the weight of something sacred, as though the forest itself leaned closer to listen to their breath. The Mycalun Blightguards and Grovewardens drifted alongside, their presence both protective and strangely calming, like the rhythm of the earth itself walking in tandem with them.

After what felt like hours, they emerged once more into the hollow where the fire still smoldered. The scent of herbs and moss lingered, faint smoke curling upward to vanish among the boughs above. The companions sank down onto reed mats with audible relief, their bodies weary but their minds alive with what they had seen—the Peace Stone, the Glowspires, the very breath of the forest whispering in the mist.

Cyra was the first to break the hush, his voice low but vibrant. “I’ve studied arcane lineages all my life, yet none of it has spoken with the same weight as this place. It is as though the forest is not merely alive but aware… patient, eternal.”

The druid set his staff down, its charred oak head resting gently against the ground, and lowered himself beside the fire. The wreath of bone-thorns and herbs on his brow shimmered faintly in the glow. He regarded Cyra with the calm of one who had heard such words many times before.

“The forest does not think as men think. It is not swift, nor eager, nor does it hunger for mastery. It endures. Its wisdom is slow, but no less deep. And when men are dust, the trees will still remember their steps.”

Indra leaned forward, her eyes wide. “But how can you hear it as you do? We felt it, yes… but you speak to it. You answer as though it whispers directly to you.”

The druid stirred the embers with a length of bark, sending sparks drifting skyward. “Because I do not demand it speak as I wish. I meet it where it is. In silence, in patience. And when the silence grows deep, when my breath slows, I take into myself the gift of its roots.”

Korin frowned, intrigued despite himself. “Gift? You mean herbs, don’t you?”

The druid’s gaze did not waver. “Yes. Certain plants chosen by the forest itself. When consumed with reverence, they open the boundary between what men call seen and unseen. With them, and with meditation, I call the spirits forth—not to command them, but to listen.”

Gundur let out a low grunt, rubbing his beard. “So you sit, eat a handful of weeds, and suddenly ghosts come for tea. Hells, stranger things I’ve heard.”

A faint smile passed over the druid’s lips. “Not ghosts. Not what men fear. They are the echoes of balance, the weavers of breath and stone. When they come, the air thickens. Fire burns without wood. Shadows move without cause. The forest speaks through them.”

The companions leaned closer, the warmth of the fire painting their faces, their eyes catching the glimmer of fascination. Even Gundur, skeptical though he was, could not hide the curiosity in his gaze.

The druid closed his eyes briefly, as though feeling the presence of something beyond the circle of firelight. When he opened them again, they held the stillness of deep water.

“You have seen roots, memory, and breath,” he said softly. “Now I will show you the spirits themselves.”

And with those words, the night seemed to lean in, the crackle of the fire dimming as though waiting for what was to come.

The druid’s voice dropped lower, carrying the weight of a tale not often spoken. The firelight danced across his weathered face, and behind him the mist of the glade seemed to gather closer, as though eager to hear the telling itself.

“When the forest parts its veil, when the roots open their breath and the silence grows deep, there are presences that step forth. Not flesh, not bone, but essence older than language. They do not come at my bidding—they arrive as they choose, and they show what they will.”

He drew a slow breath, and his eyes reflected the embers as though seeing beyond them. “Some are healers. They move through the body as a river clears silt, unbinding what has grown twisted, easing pain hidden in marrow or mind. They will rearrange what is broken within—pull rot from the soul, mend what even the wisest healer cannot touch. There are times they strip away memory itself—an old grief, a festering hate—and in its place leave silence, like fresh snowfall. I have seen men rise from their presence feeling reborn, as though life had been rethreaded through them.”

His voice darkened. “But not all who come bear light. In the deep shadows there are watchers. They linger at the edges of sight, silent, faceless, following like wolves through thickets. They never speak, yet their gaze pierces the marrow. Many who have seen them do not return. Not slain, not broken—simply gone, as though carried into some other realm. The forest gives no answer to where they are taken, only that their footprints fade, and the world forgets them.”

The companions shifted uneasily, their faces tense in the flickering glow. But the druid's words pressed on, measured and steady.

"There are also beings of pure radiance. When they appear, all noise stills. Their presence is a weight upon the soul, not cruel but relentless. They look into you, and every falsehood, every selfish act, rises to the surface. They speak seldom, yet when they do their words are like rivers of truth, impossible to deny. To be near them is to feel naked in spirit, guilty not by their judgment but by your own. Many who meet them leave with new wisdom… and others with shame so heavy they can scarcely bear it."

The druid's gaze lowered, as though recalling old encounters. Then he continued. "And then there are the tricksters, whom some call Machine Elves. They laugh in ways that ripple through the mind, voices that sound like bells caught in mirrors. They are not evil, but their games unsettle. They shuffle your thoughts as one shuffles cards—placing new memories that never were, stealing old ones, switching your past with another's. They show you how fragile your knowing is, how thin the thread of reality you cling to. And in that bewilderment, some find terror, but others find freedom—the truth that nothing is fixed, and all is illusion."

He paused, and for a moment the only sound was the crackle of wood and the faint whisper of wind through branches. Then his tone grew softer still. "There are others, stranger yet. Whispers that sing through stone, voices that carry from beneath rivers, beings who appear as animals and speak with the wisdom of ages. Some bring visions of lives yet to come, others weave dreams so real that waking feels like a lie. All serve the balance, though their ways are beyond mortal reason."

The druid looked to each of them in turn, his eyes reflecting both gravity and quiet wonder. "To meet them is to be unmade and remade. Some leave blessed, others broken. But all leave changed."

The fire popped sharply, scattering sparks upward, as though the forest itself punctuated his words. The companions sat in silence, the weight of the unseen pressing close around them, each imagining what it might mean to stand before such entities.

The druid moved slowly but with practiced ease as he ladled steaming soup from a blackened iron pot that had been hanging over the fire. The scent of venison mingled with pine and wild herbs, filling the hollow with a warmth that made the companions' stomachs growl in unison. He handed each of them a carved wooden bowl, the surface smoothed from years of use.

Gundur dipped his spoon and took the first bite, his eyes widening. "By the Stonefathers—this is finer than any tavern stew I've ever had." He leaned back with a satisfied grunt. "If you ever tire of forest life, druid, you could make a fortune in Albardack."

The druid smiled faintly, shaking his head. "I did not kill the stag whose flesh you taste. He fell in battle with wolves, beyond even my healing. The forest does not waste what it has given. I take only what is released to me, and nothing more."

Indra paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth, her gaze soft. "So you never hunt?"

“I do not,” the druid replied, his tone as steady as a slow stream. “I walk with the balance, not against it. Most days, I live on plants—roots, berries, leaves, the gifts the forest offers freely. On rare occasions, when death has already come, I share in that gift as well. But only when the forest allows it.”

Cyra sipped carefully, savoring the taste of rosemary and wild onion. “And yet you’ve cured wolves? Wolves do not often take kindly to men meddling with their wounds.”

A gentle laugh escaped the druid, like wind rustling dry leaves. “At first, they snapped and bared their teeth. But pain humbles even the fiercest. I bound their paws, fed them herbs, and waited. In time, they saw that my hand carried no malice. One even returned years later, with her pups. She let them nuzzle my hand.”

Korin gave a low whistle. “You’re braver than most kings. I’d sooner face five men with swords than one wolf with a grudge.”

The druid’s expression softened further, his eyes distant as though recalling a memory etched in moss. “Not all wounds belong to wolves. Once, I found a bear with his paw crushed by stonefall. He growled as though to split the trees, but I saw the truth in his eyes—pain, not hatred. I tended him many days, and when he was whole again, he returned to the forest. Still, he comes now and then, his coat flecked with age. He lingers near my hut, as though reminding me that even the great can be grateful.”

Ardan smiled faintly, pushing her empty bowl aside. “That… is a kind of power we will never know. To befriend the wild itself.”

The druid inclined his head. “It is not power. It is trust. And trust is the truest bond of all.”

For a time, they ate in quiet reverence, letting the warmth of the soup and the weight of the words settle in. When the last drops had been taken, the companions rose, bowing slightly in gratitude.

Indra spoke for them all. “You have shown us wisdom, and given us food and peace. We thank you, and we will carry this with us.”

The druid lifted his staff, the firelight glinting against its lightning-charred oak. “Then go, children of the road. The Glimwood is vast, but those who walk with respect will always find a path. The forest watches.”

They turned to leave, the Mycalith Grovewardens and Blightguards parting silently to let them pass. Behind them, the druid stood framed by the firelight, still as stone, the forest’s shadow and breath entwined around him.

As they walked into the trees once more, the canopy swallowed the fire’s glow, and the sound of their boots crunched softly on damp earth. Ahead stretched the winding road through Glimwood, heavy with mystery, but lighter now for the wisdom they carried.

Korin lit his pipe as they walked, exhaling a plume that drifted up through the branches. “I’ll say this much. If all forest folk were like him, I’d not mind walking woods the rest of my life.”

“Maybe one day,” Indra said with a smile, “you will.”

And so, step by step, they set forth deeper into the heart of Glimwood, guided by paths old as time.

The forest whispered around them as they walked, each step muffled by moss and damp leaves. The canopy hung thick overhead, shafts of green light breaking through in occasional slants that made the dust motes shimmer like wandering spirits. The road was no more than a worn trail between roots, and the silence stretched until Gundur, impatient as ever, broke it with a growl.

“Blasted woods. Can’t see ten steps ahead without wondering what’s lurkin’ behind a tree. Give me stone walls and iron gates any day. At least there a man knows who’s coming for his throat.”

Indra, walking a little apart with her bow slung at her shoulder, glanced at him with a cold look. “That’s because you fear what you don’t control. The forest doesn’t bow to walls or gates. It grows as it wills.”

“Feh.” Gundur spat into the undergrowth. “Trees don’t keep an axe from splitting ’em. Same with beasts. Everything bleeds. You talk like the forest is some god, but it’s just wood and dirt, same as anything.”

Indra’s tone sharpened. “And you talk like every living thing is yours to cut down or chain. Not all blood is meant for your blade, Gundur.”

Korin gave a dry chuckle, his voice low as smoke. “Careful, Indra. You’ll tire yourself out lecturing him. Gundur doesn’t hear wisdom—only the ring of coin and steel.”

“Damn right,” Gundur snapped back, but there was a hint of pride in his grin. “Steel’s fed me longer than roots and berries ever will.”

Cyra, who had been quiet until then, tilted his head, his dark eyes glinting with interest. “Roots and berries may not buy armies, Gundur, but there is a kind of power in them. Same as in bones, blood, even in the dirt under your boots. You’d be surprised what can be drawn out with the right words, the right symbols.”

Ardan’s calm voice threaded between them, unhurried. “And there you show your hand, Cyra. Power above all else. Even when it rots the hand that holds it.”

Cyra smirked faintly, his voice like silk wrapping a blade. “Better to rot with power than to wither with none.”

Indra snorted softly. “And that’s why no wolf or tree would trust you. Power above life. Always taking, never giving.”

Cyra’s eyes lingered on her for a moment, then slid away to the shadows between the trees. “And yet here you are, walking with me, depending on my fire when the dark grows too close. Think on that before you cast your stones, tree-sister.”

The silence stretched again, uneasy this time, broken only by the crunch of boots and the faint croak of a raven far overhead.

It was Korin who broke it next, his voice almost conversational, though his eyes were shadowed. “I had a vision again. In my sleep, or maybe not. The road, much like this one, only it never ended. Every time I thought I saw an end, it twisted back on itself. I walked until my feet bled, and still there was no gate, no inn, no fire.”

Ardan regarded him calmly, almost as though studying a text. “A dream of futility. Or perhaps of eternity. Roads are symbols of fate. To walk one without end is to deny destination. You may be being shown the truth of your own resistance.”

Korin gave a thin smile, humorless. “You call it resistance. I call it refusal. I’ll not be bound by fate’s leash, no matter how many visions it throws my way.”

Gundur gave a rough laugh. “Ha! If fate’s trying to catch you, Korin, it picked the wrong hunter. You’re too damned slippery.”

Cyra’s voice slid in, cool and amused. “Or maybe he only thinks himself free. Dreams lie, too, you know. Spirits delight in twisting mortal pride.”

“Perhaps,” Korin said, adjusting the strap of his bow. His voice dropped low, almost to himself. “But when I see the dead in those visions, when they walk with hollow eyes, I don’t hate them. I pity them. They’re not enemies—they’re failures. Memories with no vessel. Flesh that forgot how to be alive.”

That silenced the group for a long moment. Even Gundur’s smirk faded, and Indra glanced at him sidelong, her eyes narrowed as if seeing him differently for the first time.

The forest grew thicker ahead, the path narrowing between roots as though the earth itself leaned in to listen to their words.

The trail twisted through a low thicket, roots rising like the ribs of some ancient beast, forcing the party to step carefully. Dampness clung to the air, heavy with the smell of mushrooms and wet bark. Their footsteps sank softly into moss, and the silence seemed to stretch until Gundur broke it once more, muttering.

“Bah, we talk too much of dreams and fate. Give me a good blade and an enemy to bury it in. That’s all the destiny I need.”

Ardan's tone was quiet but steady, like water smoothing stone. "And yet even a blade follows a pattern, Gundur. The swing, the strike, the blood that falls. All part of a thread woven before you even raise your hand."

Gundur shot her a glare. "Don't start with your patterns again. You'd say every man's life is a tapestry already sewn. If that's true, why bother lifting my blade at all?"

Ardan didn't flinch. "Because your lifting it was written too."

That earned a sharp laugh from Cyra, who was walking just behind them, his fingers absently tracing the spine of his spellbook. "And this is why fate and prophecy amuse me. A neat excuse for whatever one does—whether it's slaughter or sainthood. It frees you from blame. And if one is clever enough, one can twist fate into a leash for others. Entire kingdoms have been bent by a prophecy whispered at the right time."

Indra's voice cut through, cold and edged. "And you would do the same, wouldn't you? Twist words, twist people, so long as it fed your hunger for spells and power."

Cyra didn't even look at her, his tone calm and calculating. "If it were necessary. If the knowledge it brought me outweighed the harm. Power is never gentle, Indra—it's a river. You either learn to ride it, or you drown beneath it."

Indra stopped in her stride, turning to face her fully, her hand resting on the bow at her side. "And I'd sooner drown than let myself be carried where I don't choose."

Korin chuckled softly, his voice dry as dead leaves. "Careful, Cyra. You'll find Indra doesn't bend, not to rivers, not to kings, and not to you."

"Nor do trees bend forever," Cyra murmured, a slight smile playing at his lips. "They snap."

The tension lingered in the air until Ardan interjected, her tone smooth, measured. "Perhaps both of you are right. Trees snap, rivers drown. But both endure in their own way. Fate does not care which of you claims the stronger truth. It merely weaves the pattern from your choices."

Gundur grunted and spat into the moss. "All this talk. You sound like priests drunk on their own voices. Fate, power, rivers—bah. I'll take what I can, when I can. If the gods or spirits don't like it, they can come tell me to my face."

Korin smirked faintly, his eyes shadowed as he looked ahead into the darkening woods. "Careful what you wish for. Some spirits don't ask. They simply take."

A hush fell over the group again, the forest closing in with damp silence. Somewhere above, a crow croaked, and the sound echoed like a warning.

Gundur rolled his shoulders with a grunt, muttering under his breath. "Still better than your cursed silence, Korin. At least spirits, I can hit with a blade."

But even he glanced into the trees with unease, as though wondering if something unseen was already listening.

The forest deepened, trees crowding closer together so that the light above became a green twilight. The path was little more than a ribbon of soil pressed down by deer hooves and centuries of rain. Each step seemed swallowed by the earth, muffled until it felt as though the woods were listening more than echoing. The party walked in silence for a time, until Korin's low voice cut through, unexpected.

"I had another dream recently."

Ardan looked over at him, calm and steady as ever. "Another vision?"

Korin nodded, his gaze fixed ahead, though his eyes seemed far away. "The dead were there. Only this time, they were not hollow. They were singing. A chorus, endless, their mouths open but no sound came out. I heard it, but not with my ears. I felt it in my bones."

Cyra tilted his head, curiosity glinting in his dark eyes. "And what did they sing of?"

Korin's dry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "That's the trick. I understood it then, but I don't remember now. Only that it was not despair. Something… close to longing."

Indra, walking a little apart, gave a quiet snort. "You speak of corpses as though they were sages. They are not. They are failures, like you've said before. Flesh that forgot to live."

Korin glanced at her, eyes shadowed. "Failures, yes. But even failures can remember what we forget. Perhaps their song is memory itself. Memory of what we were before we chose blades and fire."

Gundur spat into the dirt, grinning grimly. "Bah. If the dead sing, it's because they've nothing better to do. I'll not waste breath wondering what a corpse has to say. If they had wisdom, they wouldn't be rotting in the ground."

Cyra chuckled, his voice like smoke curling through the underbrush. "You speak with such certainty, Gundur, but the dead whisper louder than you know. Their bones are full of power. The right ritual, the right words, and their silence becomes a weapon."

Indra turned sharply toward her, eyes narrowed. "Always the same with you. Power over life, power over death. It disgusts me."

Cyra arched a brow, unbothered. "It disgusts you because you fear it. You clutch your trees and animals as if they'll shield you from the truth. Everything dies, Indra. Everything. Would you rather turn your eyes away, or wield that truth in your hand?"

Indra's voice was low, edged like a drawn blade. "I would rather live in balance, not desecrate it. What you call power, I call theft."

Ardan raised a hand slightly, calm as stone. “Enough. Both paths lead to ruin if taken too far. Power is a pattern, and patterns devour themselves when left unchecked. The river floods. The tree falls. Balance is not silence, but motion between extremes.”

Korin gave a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “Spoken like a priestess of fate. You’ll never tire of seeing threads where the rest of us see knots.”

Ardan’s gaze stayed steady, almost serene. “Threads or knots, it is all the same cloth. Even your dreams, Korin, even your silence. All part of the weaving.”

The group fell into quiet again, though the air between them was thick with unspoken thought. Above, the wind stirred the canopy, and the leaves rustled like whispers in an old tongue, carrying the weight of their words into the shadows.

The forest pressed close, damp air thick with the smell of moss and wet bark. They moved in a thin line along the narrow trail, branches brushing against shoulders and packs. Gundur said with his voice a low grumble.

“Strange damned wood. Too quiet. In the north, forests breathe different. You hear wolves, owls, even the wind has a bite to it. Here? It’s like the trees are watching.”

Indra glanced at him with her usual sharpness. “Perhaps they are. The Glimwood is old. Older than our maps, older than cities. The trees remember. That’s why it feels heavy.”

Gundur spat on the ground. “Trees remembering… bah. If they remember, then they remember how easy they burn.”

Indra’s eyes flashed, but before she could retort, Ardan spoke, calm as ever. “Perhaps Gundur isn’t wrong. Old woods often bear scars. Fires, axes, storms. The memories of such things may linger in the land. Some say that’s why these places grow strange plants—things that sprout where sorrow once settled.”

Cyra smiled faintly, his eyes lingering on a patch of glowing fungi beneath a root. “And those plants… they hold power. A clever hand could turn them into potions, poisons, visions. The forest gives secrets to those who dare taste them.”

Korin gave a dry chuckle. “Taste them, and half the time you’ll wake up blind or not at all.”

“That is the risk of knowledge,” Cyra replied smoothly. “Every page I’ve studied was bought with someone’s failure, someone’s blood. Better theirs than mine.”

Indra shook her head. “You speak of failure as if it’s something to step over, not something to learn from. No wonder the forest would sooner choke you than embrace you.”

Gundur barked a laugh. “Ha! The forest can choke him if it likes, as long as he blasts a fireball or two before he goes. I’d take that trade.”

Cyra smirked without looking back. “Careful, Gundur. I may just test that theory on you next time.”

The dwarf grinned, tugging at his beard. “Wouldn’t be the first time one of your flames singed me. I’ve still the scars.”

The path widened slightly, and the group walked abreast for a time. Ardan lifted her gaze to the towering trees. “This forest… it reminds me of childhood tales. Old ones, of beasts that lived only in shadow. My grandmother spoke of them—creatures with eyes like lanterns that followed hunters until they went mad.”

“Lantern eyes…” Korin said quietly. “I’ve heard that name. Wanderers see them sometimes. Most don’t come back. But the ones who do… never speak right again.”

Gundur spat again, hefting his sword onto his shoulder. “Stories. Every forest has them. Wolves, goblins, shadows. Nothing an axe can’t split in two.”

“Not everything bleeds,” Indra replied coldly. “Some creatures just are immune to your blade.”

The silence that followed was heavier than before, as though the Glimwood itself had leaned in closer to listen.

The air grew thicker the deeper they went, heavy with damp earth and the faint, sweet rot of old leaves. The path had nearly disappeared, swallowed by roots that rose like coiled serpents and dips of black mud where puddles lingered. They walked single file now, with Korin leading, eyes sharp, scanning the shadows.

After a long silence, Ardan spoke, her voice steady as a metronome. “Strange, isn’t it, how places shape the people who live near them. A forest like this—dark, endless—would raise folk different from those of a valley or plain.”

Gundur gave a grunt. “Hells, aye. I grew in the mountains. We learned young to fight for every scrap. Rocks don’t feed you, storms don’t care for you. If you didn’t swing an axe, you didn’t live. That’s why I trust steel. A blade never lies.”

Indra shook her head, her voice cool. “And that’s why you are the way you are. You think only in strikes and wounds. I grew in the green woods. Learned that patience feeds more than blood ever will. You call it weakness; I call it survival.”

“Survival’s the same either way,” Gundur shot back. “You eat or you don’t. Difference is, when I kill a beast, I know it’s dead. You with your berries and roots—what happens when winter comes?”

Indra’s tone sharpened. “Winter comes for all, Gundur. Even you can’t split the snow with your axe.”

Korin chuckled dryly, the sound rough in the damp air. “You two argue as though either path leads to peace. I grew by the sea, in a village of fishermen. Nets, storms, tides. We didn’t fight for scraps or wait for patience to bear fruit. We gambled with the ocean every day. Sometimes it gave, sometimes it swallowed you whole.”

Cyra's eyes gleamed as he listened, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "The ocean, the mountain, the forest. Each of us shaped by our cage, then claiming it as truth. I was raised in the tower schools. Stone walls, iron rules, words carved into my head like commands. They taught us magic was order, but I learned quickly it was freedom. Freedom to bend, to break, to take. When I look at you all, I see children who never learned to take what was theirs."

Indra snapped back, fierce. "And when I look at you, I see someone who never learned what it is to give. Only to drain, to burn, to consume."

Cyra's smirk widened slightly. "Better to burn than to rot."

Ardan's voice smoothed over the tension like a steady river. "All of us are echoes of where we came from. And yet here we are, walking the same path, beneath the same canopy. Perhaps that is fate's pattern—that the mountain, the sea, the tower, the wood all converge in one place, for one purpose."

Gundur grunted, shaking his head. "Always back to fate with you. Tell me, Ardan—if fate's so wise, what purpose could it have for a greedy wizard, a brooding bowman, a tree hugger, and a stubborn old dwarf?"

Ardan's eyes narrowed, though her tone remained calm. "Perhaps the pattern is not in what you are, Gundur, but in what you become together."

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled, long and low, and the forest seemed to swallow it whole. The trees grew taller as they walked, their trunks so wide that five men could not have circled them arm to arm. Moss hung from the branches like tattered curtains, and the air was heavy, almost choking with dampness. Their boots squelched in places where the ground gave way to bog-like mud, and the torch Cyra carried sputtered as if reluctant to burn in such a place.

Korin finally broke the silence, his dry voice carrying oddly in the muffled air. "Strange thing about these woods. Folk in villages nearby say the Glimwood births its own creatures. That the forest itself makes them, as if it grows more than trees."

Gundur grinned, though his voice was low. "Creatures are the best thing a forest can grow. Easier to hunt than deer, and their hides fetch a better price."

Indra shot him a sharp look. "You would turn everything into meat and coin if you could. Creatures are part of the balance here. They are not yours to slaughter for gain."

Gundur chuckled and spat. "Balance doesn't fill a stomach, elf. Steel and fire do. Tell me, when a beast tears out your throat, will you whisper balance while you choke on your own blood?"

Indra's eyes narrowed. "If a beast kills me, it does so because I was weak, or unworthy. That is its right."

Cyra smirked, his tone smooth as he stepped between their gazes. “And here we see the difference. Gundur kills for strength. Indra dies for principle. Both wasteful. Far better to bend creatures, twist them, bind them. Make them serve. Why waste a claw when it can fight at your side?”

“Abomination,” Indra muttered, her voice like steel scraped over stone.

Ardan raised her voice before Gundur could retort, calm and unhurried. “All of you speak of creatures as though they are separate from us. But are they? Men grow greedy, wolves grow hungry, mages grow reckless. What is the difference? Perhaps the forest makes creatures because we are already the mold it copies.”

That drew Korin’s faintest of smiles, though his eyes stayed fixed ahead. “And when the forest copies us, what does it make? Something stronger? Or something weaker? That’s the part no one wants to answer.”

Cyra’s gaze slid sideways at him, curious. “And what would you answer, bowman?”

He shrugged, his voice flat and dry. “Weaker, perhaps. Because creatures are honest. They don’t pretend to be what they’re not. Men do.”

The words hung in the air, heavy as the mist around them. Even Gundur didn’t answer, only tugged at his beard and pressed forward, his boots thudding against root and soil.

They walked in silence after that, broken only by the crunch of bark underfoot and the occasional croak of a hidden crow. Yet each of them seemed to turn inward, their thoughts heavier than their packs, as though the Glimwood itself was forcing them to measure the weight of their own truths.

The deeper they went, the more the forest pressed its strangeness upon them. The canopy thickened overhead, letting through only fractured shafts of green light, and the air was so still it seemed to hold its breath. At times the ground gave way into soft hollows filled with water, forcing them to step across slick stones and roots that bent like the backs of old serpents.

Gundur muttered as he hauled himself over a mossy trunk. “Place is a cursed maze. No trail worth walking. If we keep at this pace, we’ll be swallowed whole before nightfall.”

Ardan, who walked just behind him, replied evenly. “Perhaps that is the forest’s intent. To slow us. To test our patience.”

“Or to bleed us dry of it,” Gundur grumbled, landing hard on the other side of the trunk.

Cyra’s eyes glimmered faintly in the dim light. “Impatience is as deadly as any beast. If the Glimwood births monsters, perhaps it also feeds on tempers. The more you rage, Gundur, the more you give it what it wants.”

He shot him a glare. “And you’d know what it wants, eh? Always talking like you can hear the whispers of every shadow. Magic this, power that. Forests don’t whisper, they rot.”

Indra’s voice came sharp and cutting from the back. “You are blind, Gundur. These woods do whisper—you’re simply too deafened by your own anger to hear it. Every leaf here hums with memory.”

Korin, trudging along in silence until then, let out a low chuckle. “Memory, anger, whispers… If we argue any louder, even the moss will start answering back.”

That brought a pause, the weight of their bickering hanging for a moment in the damp air. Then Gundur gave a sudden bark of laughter, deep and rough. “Hah! Maybe that’s the trick, Korin. Maybe the forest already answered, and it just told me you all talk too damned much.”

Cyra snorted, the corners of his mouth curling. “For once, the dwarf makes sense.”

Indra shook her head, though even her sharp expression softened. “You’re all fools. But fools who share the same road.”

Ardan inclined her head slightly, her tone calm but warmer than usual. “And perhaps that is enough. Fools or not, we are bound together. The forest may test us, but it hasn’t broken us yet.”

Korin gave the faintest of smiles as he adjusted the strap of his quiver. “A rare thing—to still call each other friends after so much talking.”

The group chuckled, the sound oddly light against the weight of the Glimwood’s silence. For a time, the quarrels were forgotten. They walked on with easier steps, shoulders a little less tense, reminded that however harsh their words, the bond between them was stronger than the shadows pressing in around them.

The forest road stretched dimly before them, shafts of moonlight weaving through the canopy above. The night air was heavy with damp earth and rot, and then, without warning, it split with a chorus of guttural snarls. From both sides of the trail, eight gaunt shapes burst forth, their matted hides crawling with pale larvae, eyes burning with feral hunger. The Maggotfang Wolves had come.

Gundur reacted first, roaring as he lifted his blade. He charged into the pack, his sword flashing down in two furious arcs. The first wolf slipped aside with unnerving quickness, but the second caught the edge full in the ribs. Rotten flesh split open, spraying black ichor as writhing maggots squirmed into the dirt. Gundur bellowed and pressed on, his boots planted firmly against the shifting muck.

Behind him, Indra raised her bow with steady calm. Two arrows flew, the first grazing one wolf’s shoulder, staggering it, while the second found its mark cleanly through another’s eye socket. The beast shrieked as it toppled, spasming on the ground while its skull burst with crawling vermin.

Korin stepped forward, sword gleaming in the torchlight. With a brutal swing, he carved deep into a wolf's flank, severing ribs and spilling its guts onto the road. The carrion-stench filled his nostrils, but he spat and held his ground, blade ready for more.

Then came the storm. Ardan lifted her hands, fire dancing between his fingers. With a sharp incantation, she hurled a globe of flame into the very heart of the pack. The explosion tore through the night—wolves yelped and screamed as the road became a furnace, their hides alight, maggots writhing in boiling cascades.

Before the echoes of the blast faded, Cyra stepped forward, his beard glowing orange in the fire's reflection. He raised his staff and thundered, "Die, you maggots!" A second fireball roared forth, engulfing what remained. The forest shook as another wave of heat thundered outward, blackening bark and scorching leaves. Wolves tumbled, their corpses bursting open into clouds of sizzling vermin, the road turned to a battlefield of ash, char, and writhing death.

The fight was over almost as soon as it had begun. Wolves littered the ground, their bodies split and burned beyond recognition. For a moment, the air was thick with the hiss of dying larvae and the reek of scorched fur. Yet even in their destruction, the beasts sought vengeance —those nearest to Gundur and Korin erupted in showers of maggots, clouds of squirming flesh spraying into the air. But the two warriors, eyes narrowed and muscles taut, leapt back at the last second. Their boots skidded on the dirt road, but the swarm fell short, scattering harmlessly over the ground.

Silence reclaimed the forest. Smoke drifted lazily from the burning corpses, and the moon shone pale through the canopy, casting long shadows over the carnage. Gundur lowered his sword, his chest heaving, while Korin wiped foul ichor from his blade.

The party stood among the ruin, their breaths still hard, their eyes sharp. What had been a pack of hungry predators now lay in smoldering heaps upon the road, maggots writhing helplessly in the embers. The road was theirs again, though the smell of death would follow them long after they left this place.

Moonlight spilled silver through the breaks in the canopy, painting the Glimwood in pale, ghostly light. The air was damp and chill, their breaths visible as they chose a soft patch of moss for the night's camp. Korin wordlessly began setting up the tents, his movements efficient, practiced. Gundur dropped his pack with a grunt and unslung his pipe, puffing hard as he drained the last drops of ale from his waterskin. With a deep croak that echoed through the trees, he stomped the ground like a bull, the air quickly filling with the thick scent of smoke and dwarven sweat.

"Damn it all," Gundur growled, holding the limp skin upside down. "That was the last of it. Nothing but water from here on out. I'll wither before we leave this blasted forest."

Ardan, seated by the fire, stirred the rations they had portioned out. "We've survived on worse. Bread hard enough to chip teeth, dried meat that may as well be leather. It keeps us moving, and that is what matters."

Indra knelt nearby, wringing moss into her pot and adding a few leaves plucked from the damp undergrowth. "Better than leather, and better than rot. The forest still gives us tea, if nothing else." She placed the pot near the flames, letting the steam rise with a faint, earthy scent.

Cyra didn't look up from his spellbook, the firelight flickering over the inked pages. "Tea is no substitute for proper wine," he murmured absently, flipping to another page. "But then, neither is dwarven swill."

Gundur shot him a glare, puffing harder on his pipe. "You try marching half a life through these cursed woods without something to warm your gut, mage. Let's see how sweet your spells sound then."

Korin returned from staking the last tent, stretching his back as he dropped onto the moss. "Enough. We've food, we've fire. The dwarf can gnash his teeth, the elf her leaves, and the mage her pages. Just don't wake me with your grumbling."

A faint laugh rolled around the camp, easing the tension. They ate in silence for a time, gnawing at the dried meat and hard bread, washing it down with water that tasted faintly of leather from their skins.

Finally, Gundur broke the silence again, his voice low and rough. “Those wolves… fast bastards. Came at us from all sides. We handled them, aye, but what if next time it’s worse? Eight was plenty. Twelve would’ve torn us apart.”

Ardan leaned forward, elbows on her knees, gaze steady on the fire. “Then we adapt. Corridors, choke points—make them fight where their numbers mean nothing. Chaos favors them; order favors us.”

Cyra smiled faintly, eyes never leaving his book. “Or burn them before they’re close enough to bite.”

Indra stirred her tea, shaking her head. “Flames don’t care who they touch, Cyra. You’ll scorch friend as easily as foe.”

Gundur jabbed his pipe at him, scowling. “Aye, and I’ve still the singed beard to prove it.”

Korin gave a tired smirk, settling back into the moss. “So the plan is: choke them, burn them, and hope Gundur doesn’t end up bald.”

That drew a rumbling laugh from the dwarf. “Bald, maybe. Dead, never.”

The laughter faded, and for a while they only listened to the fire crackle and the faint night sounds of the Glimwood. Then Ardan spoke, her voice quieter, almost reflective. “How long do you think, till we reach the other side? A week? Two?”

Korin’s tone was dry. “Long enough for Gundur to complain a hundred more times.”

“Then I’ll complain two hundred, just to spite you,” Gundur shot back with a grin.

Indra sipped her tea, watching the fire. “The forest will let us pass when it is ready. No sooner, no later.”

That was the last word spoken before silence settled again. One by one, they slipped into their tents or lay upon the moss, the fire dimming to embers as the Glimwood wrapped them in shadow. Soon, sleep claimed them all, their breath mingling with the sighing of the trees.

The first light of dawn crept through the boughs of the forest, painting the camp in pale gold. The air was damp with morning mist, the kind that clung to skin and muffled every sound. Within the small clearing, bedrolls shifted as the party stirred awake, but it was not the chirping of birds or the rustle of leaves that roused them. It was voices.

At first it was soft, lilting — laughter like silver bells drifting on the mist. The sound of women speaking in hushed tones, punctuated by giggles and sly remarks. Korin sat up in his bedroll immediately, hand on his bow. Indra’s keen ears twitched; she slipped silently from her blanket, already reaching for her quiver. Gundur’s heavy frame rose with a grunt, hand tightening on the hilt of his sword. Cyra and Ardan exchanged wary glances, recognizing that such sounds did not belong in a deep forest at dawn.

The party moved quietly, creeping from the tents with weapons drawn. The fog parted just enough for them to see through the trees. There, not fifty paces away, were twelve figures. They lounged in a circle around a smoldering fire, their voices carrying in the stillness. Elves, by the look of them, though their beauty was marred by the hard cruelty etched into their faces. Their garments were mismatched silks and leathers, clothing that clung like shadows, and every one of them bore a dagger or thin-bladed sword at her side.

“The Sisterhood,” Ardan muttered under her breath, her lips curling. She had heard the tales: elven exiles turned brigands, a cult of thieves and seductresses who roamed the wilderness leaving only corpses and whispers behind them. They were not bound to any crown, nor did they serve gods. They were bound only to each other — a pact of knives, kisses, and betrayal.

The party crouched low among the brush, hearts pounding. The sisters were laughing, pouring stolen wine into chipped goblets, trading gossip as though they were sitting in some velvet hall rather than squatting in a forest. Yet there was nothing soft in their presence. Their name came from the vein at the throat, their favored kill — the “kiss of the last night,” they called it. These were women who cut throats after dances, who silenced bards when their voices failed, who roamed the roads with no banner but their own lust for gold and cruelty.

Korin drew his blade halfway, eyes scanning the clearing. Indra was already steadying her bow, lips curled in quiet determination. Gundur’s teeth ground together as he whispered, “Best strike first.”

Ardan gave a curt nod, fingers twitching with restrained flame. Cyra’s eyes were narrowed, his lips already shaping the words of power.

They rose as one, like hunters circling prey. The sisters did not notice until it was too late.

Indra’s first arrow cut the silence, hissing through the mist to bury itself in the shoulder of the nearest Veinshade. The woman screamed, her goblet clattering to the dirt. The Sisterhood lurched to their feet in shock, scrambling for their daggers, but the ambush had begun.

A roar of fire followed. Ardan stepped from the fog, her palm erupting with orange flame. She hurled it into their midst, and the clearing bloomed with an explosion of fire. Screams echoed through the trees as silks ignited and the smell of burning hair filled the air. Several of the sisters were hurled to the ground, their laughter replaced by shrieks of agony.

Korin charged in next, blade flashing, and drove his sword deep into the ribs of a staggered Veinshade. Blood sprayed across the grass as she collapsed with a choking gasp. Cyra, not far behind, unleashed a volley of shimmering missiles that hammered into another of the sisters, knocking her to her knees.

And then Gundur stormed into the fray. The big warrior crashed into the circle like a living avalanche, his greatsword cleaving into two foes at once. The impact was sickening — one woman fell with her chest split open, another reeled back with blood pouring from her mouth. “Die, you vein-slitting whores!” Gundur roared, his voice shaking the trees as he ripped his blade free.

The Sisterhood's surprise lasted only moments. Then came the hiss of daggers leaving sheaths, the flare of hatred in their eyes. The circle of thieves and traitors closed in, their cruel smiles twisted by rage. What had been laughter and wine a moment ago became a storm of blades and poison. The Veinshade would not fall quietly.

The ambush had become a battle.

The clearing erupted into chaos. Flames still licked the grass where Ardan's fireball had struck, casting the Sisterhood in a hellish glow. Some of the women were already smoldering, their silks blackened, their hair burned away, yet their daggers gleamed as they leapt into the fight with animal fury.

One darted forward with unnatural speed, blade flashing toward Indra. The archer twisted aside, her bow clattering against a tree as she drew another arrow. The shaft flew point-blank, tearing through the thief's throat. The woman stumbled back, clutching her neck as dark blood sprayed in hot jets. Indra drew another arrow, her face lit by the fire's glow. "Die, sluts!" she spat, loosing again.

Two more sisters rushed Gundur, their daggers slashing in perfect tandem, their cruel laughter echoing. One blade glanced off his shoulder armor, the other pierced his side. Gundur snarled through gritted teeth, unfazed by the wound, and swung his greatsword in a wide arc. The blow caught both women, sending them sprawling into the flames where their screams rose and then choked out in smoke.

Ardan's voice rang above the din, ancient syllables of power tumbling from her lips. Another sphere of fire bloomed overhead before hurtling down into the center of the Sisterhood. The explosion shook the ground, rattled the branches, and threw half a dozen of the women off their feet. When the smoke cleared, three of them lay blackened and broken, twitching weakly in the grass.

Korin fought close, his blade clashing against a Veinshade's dagger. She moved like a snake, swift and elegant, her grin mocking as she pressed against him. With a sudden twist, she slashed for his throat — but Korin ducked and drove his sword up through her chest. Her mocking grin froze as she gasped, then collapsed at his feet.

Cyra raised his hands, his eyes gleaming with rage. "Die, you maggots!" he screamed, unleashing a storm of fire into the survivors. Another fireball burst across the battlefield, consuming silks, weapons, and flesh alike. The clearing was a furnace now, the smell of burning meat thick and choking. One Sister, her body aflame, staggered forward shrieking before collapsing into ash at Indra's boots.

But the Sisterhood fought with desperate malice. One flung a throwing needle that whistled through the smoke, burying itself in Ardan's arm. She hissed, pain shooting up her side as venom burned in her blood. Another slipped through the chaos and nearly reached Cyra, her dagger flashing for the sorcerer's ribs — but Gundur caught her mid-stride, cleaving her in half with a bellow that shook the clearing.

The battle pressed on in a frenzy of arrows, steel, and flame. The Veinshade's elegance withered under the storm of destruction. Their silken cloaks, once the symbols of seduction and deceit, were now rags of blood and ash. One by one they fell — pierced by Indra's merciless arrows, blasted by Ardan's fire, hacked apart by Gundur's fury.

At last, only one remained — bloodied, trembling, her silk robes scorched to tatters. She staggered back, her dagger slipping from her hand as she hissed through bloody teeth, "The Kiss of the Last Night will find you…" But her threat was cut short as Korin's arrow thudded into her chest. She dropped without another word, lifeless upon the smoldering ground.

Silence fell over the clearing. Only the crackle of flames and the labored breathing of the party remained. The Sisterhood of the Veinshade — twelve dark-hearted exiles who had stalked the forests and the roads for years — lay broken at their feet.

Gundur wiped his blade clean with a ragged piece of silk, sneering down at the corpses. “No more whispers. No more knives in the dark.”

Cyra picked up the torch he had dropped in the chaos, its light flickering over the carnage. “They danced their last,” he muttered coldly.

The fire began to die down, leaving only smoldering ashes where the Sisterhood had once laughed and schemed. The forest was quiet again, but the memory of their cruel laughter lingered in the party’s minds like a haunting echo.

The Veinshade were finished.

The battle’s roar gave way to the hush of a forest still cloaked in smoke. The party gathered near the smoldering remains of the Sisterhood, each tending wounds in the dim firelight. Gundur sat hunched, binding the gash at his ribs, his face dark with exhaustion and fury. Ardan’s hands trembled as she drew a dagger from her arm — the flesh already swollen and discolored from the poison’s slow burn. Indra leaned against a tree, pale, her bow laid across her knees, the poison from a needle still gnawing at her veins. Even Cyra, though unhurt by steel, felt the weight of the toxins seeping through his blood where a dagger had grazed his skin. Only Korin moved steadily among them, tearing strips of cloth for bandages, his face grim as he looked at the bodies strewn in the clearing, he read some healing words and knelt by each ally in turn, pulling a small tin from his satchel. Inside was a paste the color of tarnished bronze—ground from the narrow leaves of veilroot, a bitter marsh plant known to slightly dull the common toxins.

“They were beautiful,” Ardan murmured bitterly, spitting blood into the dirt. “Beautiful — and rotten to the core.”

Cyra nodded, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at the ashes of silks and the gleam of broken daggers. “That’s the danger of them. Beauty to hide the knives. Smiles to hide the venom.”

Indra gave a hollow laugh, shaking her head. “No gods. No loyalty. Just whispers and blood.”

The fire flickered over their faces — weary, poisoned, but alive. The Sisterhood of the Veinshade had fallen, but their venom lingered still, burning in the veins of those who had faced them.

The clearing was still thick with the copper tang of blood when the party returned. Moonlight gleamed over the sprawled bodies of the twelve slain women, their black-veined blades glistening with the poison that had nearly laid them all low. The forest was silent now, as if even the trees had recoiled from what had been unleashed here.

Korin crouched first, pulling a small purse from one of the fallen and tossing it into the growing pile. “Gold enough here to keep us drinking for a month,” he muttered, shaking his

head at the sheer weight of the sisters' plunder. "Three hundred and twenty in gold, six hundred and forty silver, and more foreign coins than I care to name. Twenty-five gold worth, at least."

Cyra's eyes glittered as he held up two bolts of deep green silk, their sheen catching even the faintest light. "Elven weave," he said softly, almost reverently. "Fifty gold each, if not more, though I could use them for enchantments." He tucked them into his pack before anyone could argue. "And this—" he lifted a silver hand mirror, turning it to catch the firelight, "—useless for me, but worth coin. I'll keep it safe until we sell."

Indra knelt by another body, pulling a set of delicate anklets strung with moonstone from a pouch. She ran her fingers over them, the faint shimmer reflected in her green eyes. "Seventy-five gold," she murmured. "Beautiful, but impractical. Perhaps I will keep them—for their beauty, not for greed."

Meanwhile, Gundur bent low and picked through the weapons, grumbling as he examined the twisted blades. "Six daggers, all kissed with poison. One strike apiece before the venom dulls. I'll take two. Always liked a weapon you can hide." He shoved them into his belt and spat. "The rest of you can fight over the others."

Ardan gathered the remaining four daggers and tucked them carefully into a cloth wrap. "Best they're carried with caution. I'll keep them for now. We may need them more than we think."

From another pouch, Korin drew a set of nine thin throwing needles, each tipped with a faint sheen of the same black poison. He weighed them in his palm, expression unreadable. "I'll use these. Quieter than a bow, and just as deadly when placed well." He slipped them into a leather case and strapped it to his thigh.

Then Cyra gasped , his fingers brushing over a black gossamer scarf that seemed to drink in the moonlight itself. The fabric was impossibly light, yet shadows seemed to cling to it like oil. "Veil of Shadows," he whispered. "Rare, and potent. One of them wore it." He let it slide across his fingers, the cloth vanishing almost entirely in his hands. "It bends light, hides the wearer in shadow. I'll claim this."

Gundur snorted. "Of course you would. Always wanting to slink about like a thief."

"Better a shadow," Cyra replied coolly, "than a loud, clanking drunk."

Korin cleared his throat, interrupting before Gundur could bite back. "Enough. We've divided the spoils. Let's not fight over scraps."

With their loot secured, the party returned to their camp. The fire had dimmed to embers, and their gear lay scattered where they had left it. They packed in silence for a while, the weight of the battle still heavy on their shoulders.

As Gundur cinched his pack shut, he grumbled, "Ale's gone, rations dry, and now shadows for company. If this forest doesn't spit us out soon, I'll carve my own path."

Ardan, calm as ever, replied, “The forest allows no path but its own. Patience, Gundur. Every step forward brings us closer.”

Indra slung her bow over her shoulder, giving a faint smile. “Closer to what, I wonder. Freedom? Or another fight?”

“Both,” Korin said simply, pipe clenched in his teeth. “Always both.”

They doused the last of the fire, shouldered their packs, and stepped back onto the winding trail. The Glimwood swallowed them once more, shadows shifting around their forms, as if the forest itself had been waiting for their return.

The two days in Glimwood were a slow grind of rain and mud. The storm never lifted, only shifted from sheets of hammering water to thin needles that sliced through the canopy. Their boots sank into the mire with every step, the path dissolving into pools that swallowed ankles and splattered their leggings with filth. Gundur slipped twice, cursing and slamming his fists into the ground before dragging himself up with dripping fury. Cyra stumbled once, his pack catching on a low branch, and spat a string of words sharp enough to make even Korin chuckle through clenched teeth. Indra, though silent, carried exhaustion in her eyes, her steps heavy from the lingering poison leftovers that burned faintly in her blood.

By the time they finally broke free of the forest’s endless green-black press, they were drenched to the bone, mud caked on their boots and armor. Ahead, moss-choked ruins loomed through the drizzle: the broken husk of an ancient church, its roof collapsed and walls leaning like tired giants. They dragged themselves inside the shattered stone shell and dropped their packs with groans.

“Bloody Glimwood,” Gundur growled, wringing water from his beard. “Two days of slogging in its guts, and what do we get? Ruins and wet bones. Feels like the forest spat us out.”

“Better spat than swallowed,” Korin muttered, setting his bow against a stone pillar and beginning the tedious task of pulling mud from his boots with the tip of his knife.

Cyra crouched near the collapsed altar, attempting to strike a spark into a small pile of damp twigs. The flint hissed and spat uselessly. “The wood’s too wet,” he said, his voice edged with sharp frustration. “Even with tinder, it won’t catch.”

Indra appeared from the side chamber with a small bundle of moss and half-rotted branches. “This will burn—slow, smoky, but burn,” she said flatly, kneeling to add it to Cyra’s pitiful pile. Her hands shook slightly from the strain of bending, the poison still gnawing at her strength.

Gundur, half slouched against the wall, let out a grumble. “If the poison doesn’t finish us, the damp will. My bones ache like an old man’s. And the ale’s gone.”

Ardan, who had been laying out the tents in what dry corners remained, spoke without looking up. “Complaining will not dry us. Nor feed us. Sit, Gundur, and save your breath.”

“Sit?” Gundur spat. “That’s all we’ve done when we weren’t slogging through muck. I’ll sit when the ground isn’t colder than my axe head.”

Korin leaned back against the wall, puffing on his empty pipe out of habit, though it had nothing left to give. “Then pace. Curse. Break a stone if you must. But do it quieter.”

Cyra finally coaxed a weak flame from the moss, smoke curling thick and acrid into the ruin. He sat back, hair plastered to his face, and muttered, “Better than nothing.”

They gnawed at the last of their dried meat, tough and tasteless after days of damp. No one said much as they chewed—only the crackle of wet moss and the endless tapping of rain against broken stone filled the silence. Gundur sharpened his sword with harsh strokes, the rasp ringing through the ruin. Cyra cleaned the edges of the daggers with a cloth that was as soaked as everything else, muttering arcane words under his breath. Indra sat cross-legged, eyes closed, as if willing her body to rid itself of the poison.

When the tents were finally pitched in the driest corners of the ruin, the party retreated into them, one by one. The rain kept falling, soft and endless, a curtain that hid the world beyond the ruins. Their mood was heavy, the weariness of the road weighing on them more than the packs on their backs. For now, there was nothing left but to wait for the rain to pass.

The mood was somber, as always in these times. Broken columns leaned like ancient drunks, and a statue of a forgotten saint lay face-down in the mud.

Then they heard a sound, armored boots grinding against wet stone. Not one pair. Two. Echoing from the eastern archway, a pair of figures emerged through the mist, both clad in fire-scarred black full plate, their crimson shields bearing the sigil of a bloodied eclipse. Black Knights of the Blood Omen.

Cyra stood first, his hand tightening around the Staff of Power, just as the larger of the two knights raised his sword and spoke in a tongue long lost to time—Old Lawscript. The very air grew heavy, bending under the weight of judgment.

“You stand in defiance,” the knight said, voice like steel dragged over stone. “By the Brotherhood Edict, you are forfeit.”

The second Black Knight lunged first, his longsword sweeping in a two-handed arc toward Korin. The strike landed with brutal precision, cleaving through cloak and flesh alike, and leaving a necrotic burn where it struck. Korin gritted his teeth and retaliated, sword flashing —but the knight’s shield turned the blow aside.

From behind a pillar, Indra loosed twin arrows. The first struck true, burying deep in the knight’s shoulder. The second sailed wide as the knight ducked behind his shield.

Gundur rose with a growl, mud slinging from his boots as he charged into melee. With a vicious downward stroke, his Earthsplitter Greatsword crashed into the knight’s helm. The force cracked the scorched metal. Gundur followed up immediately with another strike, biting into the knight’s ribs. Blood sprayed the stones.

Cyra stepped forward, eyes aglow, and unleashed a Fireball. Flames erupted around the knight, devouring cloak, flesh, and bone alike. Screams echoed in the chapel ruins. When the fire died, the knight stood smoking and charred, but alive—barely.

Ardan raised her hand and followed with a second Fireball, catching the second knight as he approached. Blackened smoke burst skyward as the spell ripped through enchanted plate, tearing through shields of holy devotion —a stunning first strike.

Second Knight collapsed mid-step, flesh cooked and armor melted. A smoking pile.

The remaining Black Knight roared, activating the Oath of Blood—an aura of red law sigils burning to life around him. Each blow he struck would now siphon life, binding judgment to his blade. He surged toward Gundur, ignoring the others.

His longsword, crackling with necrotic energy, struck Gundur with precision, and a brutal shield bash knocked the dwarf flat into the mud. Blood oozed into the grass.

Korin recovered and attacked, but his blade bounced off black plate. Miss.

Indra, ever-accurate, fired again. The first arrow caught the knight in the thigh, the second in the chest, driving him to a knee.

But Gundur, dazed and prone, missed twice—sword scraping harmlessly off the knight's armor.

Cyra stepped into full view and launched another Fireball, the impact charring every inch of the knight's armor. He stumbled back, face half-melted, smoke pouring from under his helm.

Ardan's Magic Missiles followed—crashing into his chest like thunderclaps. The knight dropped to one knee, body shaking. He was barely alive.

Despite his wounds, the knight surged forward once more, cutting deep into Indra with a final, defiant stroke. The sword bit into her ribs, sending black necrotic tendrils seeping into her blood. But she stood tall.

And then—Korin, breathing hard, raised his bow one last time. The arrow flew straight and silent, burying into the knight's visor.

The knight collapsed backward, sword falling from his fingers, clattering against broken stone.

Silence fell. Only the hiss of the rain remained.

The party took a long moment to breathe, each warrior standing in the rain, watching the blood run in tiny rivers along the broken floor of the church.

Cyra, practical as ever, waved a hand to douse the remaining flames.

The bodies of the Black Knights were examined. Though burned and broken, the remnants of their sacred armory and belongings remained.

Among the smoldering remains of the two Black Knights, the party uncovered several grim trophies. Each knight had borne a longsword with a blackened blade, its edge untouched by the flames of battle. Along the flat of each sword, faintly inscribed runes in the Old Lawscript shimmered when turned to the light—symbols of judgment and ancient vows. One of the knights had also carried a heavy shield, dented but intact, its surface emblazoned with the sigil of a bound eclipse. The shield's edges were trimmed in tarnished silver, and though scorched, it radiated a quiet, resolute energy.

Around the neck of the senior knight hung a cold, iron amulet—simple in design but unnerving to look upon. When lifted from his body, it glowed faintly red, pulsing in time with some distant rhythm. The back of the amulet was engraved with a line in Old Lawscript, too worn to fully translate, but the word *"Binding"* stood out clearly.

Tucked beneath the knight's armor, bound in a scrollcase of blackened bone, was a sealed parchment inscribed in sharp, angular hand. It bore the seal of the Blood Omen and reeked of sanctified incense and old iron—a scroll of banishment, clearly intended for use in ritual combat against those deemed unlawful or unworthy.

Beyond these relics of their fallen foes, the party gathered coin from their purses—thirty-five gold pieces, seventy silver, and three polished bloodstones, each gleaming red as fresh wounds. A simple silver ring was also found, worn on the left hand of the elder knight. Its inner band was delicately etched with the words, *"To Brother Aelric, Forever Bound."* Whether a gift of kinship or something more, none could say.

Lastly, found inside a scorched satchel beneath the shield's strap, was a slim leather-bound journal written entirely in Old Lawscript. Though many of the pages were damaged by heat and blood, what remained hinted at dark intent: cryptic references to a ruined monastery somewhere to the north, and repeated invocations of something called the Crimson Doctrine.

What purpose these items once served was now of little consequence. They belonged, for the moment, to the victors.

The fire was rekindled. Wounds were tended. And beneath the ruined crossbeam of the shattered church, five adventurers sat again—silent, tired, alive. For now.

The Blood Omen was broken.

Korin sat by the dim glow of the campfire, the rain outside still whispering against the stone walls of the ruined church. The scorched satchel lay open before him, its leather stiff with smoke and blood. From it he pulled the charred journal once more, turning its brittle pages with careful fingers. The text, etched in the sharp angular lines of Old Lawscript, was half-eaten by flame, yet enough remained to draw forth a tale steeped in shadow. His eyes narrowed as he began to read aloud, his voice low and deliberate.

"The Black Knights of the Blood Omen," he translated, "were no mere soldiers, but a sworn brotherhood bound by oath and doctrine, drawn from fallen houses and exiled sons. They forged themselves in secrecy within the northern highlands, and their sanctum was the

Monastery of Dread Hollow—a fortress of stone and prayer where silence was broken only by the clash of steel and the chanting of dark litanies. Their founder, Lord-Marshal Athryn Veyne, was a knight stripped of lands for treachery, who claimed a vision of crimson fire from the heavens. He said the world's order was built on lies, and only through blood could truth be restored. Thus was born the Crimson Doctrine."

Korin turned a page, smudged black at the edges. His finger traced the words as he spoke them, almost tasting the weight of their zeal.

"The Doctrine declares that flesh is a prison, and through the shedding of blood one may pierce the veil of falsehood. Each battle, each sacrifice, was seen as a cleansing—washing away the illusions that bind men. They taught that to kill was not to end a life, but to free it. The Doctrine's invocations repeat this: *'Through blood, truth. Through truth, release. Through release, the world made whole.'* Another passage speaks: *'The red tide rises, and in its surge all chains are broken. Blessed be the wound, for it is the mouth of revelation.* "'

The next lines crumbled in his fingers, but enough ink remained to hint at darker practices.

"The journal tells of their rites," Korin continued grimly. "Initiates drank from a chalice mixed with their own blood, swearing their lives to the Crimson Tide. They marked their armor with symbols—crescent scars carved into their flesh, overlaid with sigils painted in their own wounds. In time, it says, they ceased to see themselves as mortal men, but as heralds of the Doctrine's revelation. Death was not feared, for it was the final baptism."

He paused, glancing up at the others, shadows flickering over his tired features.

"The monastery is said to lie in ruin now. Fire consumed it when the northern lords rose against them. Yet the journal claims their relics remain hidden in the crypts beneath the monastery halls. Their banners, their chalices, their books of Doctrine—and perhaps those who did not perish in the flames. The writer—whoever he was—seemed to believe that the Crimson Doctrine was not ended, only waiting. Waiting in blood and shadow."

Korin closed the book with a soft thud, its blackened leather sighing like a tired ghost. The fire crackled and spat, but in the silence that followed his reading, it felt as though the very ruin around them had leaned closer to listen.

The night in the ruins passed without disturbance, though none of them slept especially well. The rain tapped steadily on the stones above, dripping into their tents, and the damp cold clung to their bones. When dawn came, gray and wan, they sat in a weary circle and ate the last of their rations in silence—crumbs of dried meat, crusts of stale bread, the faint taste of smoke from last night's weak fire. The poison that lingered in their bodies made even this small meal sit uneasily in their stomachs, leaving them pale and sluggish.

Korin, who alone had escaped the venom, unwrapped a small bundle of dried veilroot from his satchel. He tore it into pieces, passing it around. "Chew it slow," he said. "It will burn the throat, but it will burn out the sickness too." The others obeyed, grimacing at the bitter tang. Indra spat once onto the ground, muttering in Elvish. Gundur coughed and swore, clutching

at his belly. “That root tastes worse than goblin piss,” he growled, though already the color seemed to return faintly to his cheeks.

They broke camp, shouldering their packs and setting off once more. The road was little more than a sodden scar through the meadows, puddles glistening in the gray light. Their boots sank into the mud with each step, the sound a steady squelching rhythm. None spoke for a long while; the air was thick with weariness, broken only by the cawing of distant crows.

As the day wore on, they climbed over low hills and dipped down through scattered groves where spring flowers dared to bloom. The trail broadened, merging into a wagon path, its deep ruts filled with rainwater. By midday their stomachs were gnawing at them, hunger clawing sharp and hollow. Indra stopped by a mossy stone, her keen eyes searching the ground. She tore up a patch of greenish moss, squeezing it in her hand. “Edible,” she said curtly, and they each chewed down a small handful. It gave them little more than a mouthful of bitter grit, but enough to keep their legs moving.

That night they camped beneath a grove of beeches, their bellies aching and fire little more than embers. No one laughed, though Gundur muttered in his sleep, swinging his hand as though wielding his sword even in dreams.

The next day they reached the river. It curved along the land like a silver ribbon, its waters swollen with the rains. They followed its bank, the sound of rushing current filling their ears, mingled with the calls of waterfowl. The air was clearer here, brighter; shafts of sunlight pierced the clouds at last, striking the ripples in brilliant flashes. The mood, if not lightened, was at least softened by the beauty of it.

They paused to try their luck with the fishing rod, but the river mocked them, its surface unbroken save for darting shadows of fish just beyond reach. After half an hour with nothing to show, they packed the rod and continued on, packs weighing heavy on shoulders that sagged more with every step. Hunger gnawed sharper now, and each mile stretched longer than the last.

“Damn,” Gundur mumbled as he dragged one boot after the other. “I’d eat a whole tavern empty, benches, mugs, and all.” He lit his pipe, smoke curling lazily into the fresh air. “And then I’d chew the bark off the walls.”

Cyra smirked faintly, though his voice was dry. “You’d still complain of hunger after, dwarf.”

Ardan walked with steady calm, though her eyes wandered the river’s glinting surface. “Hunger humbles. It reminds us what we are beneath all else.”

Indra plucked a blade of grass as they walked, rolling it between her fingers. “Hunger is nature’s way of keeping us moving. If we were always full, we’d sit still and rot.”

Korin chuckled under his breath, watching a heron rise from the river's edge in a slow sweep of wings. "Then let's hope we don't rot before we reach Goldor. Two days yet, and the road will wring us dry."

Despite their weariness, the warmth of the sun, the fresh scent of water and earth, and friendship carried them forward. For a little while, their burdens felt lighter, even as their bellies remained hollow.

The wagon trail stretched ahead like a pale scar through the rolling countryside, its mud drying at last beneath a benevolent sun. The air was warmer now, and the spring breeze stirred the branches of young birches along the path, carrying with it the sweet smell of thawed earth and distant blossoms. Indra walked lightly, her hair lifting in the breeze, and for the first time in days she seemed free of her aloof silence. She plucked a delicate spring flower—violet in color—and wove it into her hair before lifting her voice in song.

Her words rose in Elvish first, then softened into the common tongue:

"Where rivers carve their silver thread,
Where roots drink deep of stone,
The earth remembers every step,
Though none walk back to home.

The wind will carry names away,
But songs remain to bind,
The forest whispers not of death,
But of the soul behind."

Her clear, melodic tones wove through the warming air, carrying lightness into weary hearts. Gundur, trudging under the weight of his pack, raised a thick brow but said nothing, though his scowl softened. Ardan smiled faintly, muttering about the elegance of fate finding voice in song. Korin allowed himself a brief chuckle, rare as it was, and even Cyra's hard expression eased for a moment as he tapped his fingers against the spine of his spellbook in rhythm with the tune.

Goldor

Yet hunger still clung to them like a shadow. Their bones ached with the emptiness, their steps were slower than they should have been, and more than once Ardan stumbled, her vision swimming with black spots. She cursed softly and leaned on her wand, sweat on her brow despite the mild air.

By late afternoon, the horizon opened, and there it was—Goldor. The sight drew the breath from their lungs as much as it filled them with relief. The city rose against the bend of the river, walls of stone girding its heart, with towers and rooftops thrusting upward in uneven layers. The river itself split the city clean, wide and deep, carrying barges and ferries along its

flow. Several bridges spanned the water, stout stone arches and wooden constructs with lifting mechanisms that allowed the passage of tall-masted boats. The sound of distant bells carried faintly across the fields, and smoke curled lazily upward from dozens of chimneys.

Goldor was no mere frontier town like Albardack—it was alive with the hum of thousands. Here were smithies where hammer struck iron from dawn until dusk; sprawling markets where traders from distant lands hawked silks, spices, and strange relics; taverns of every ilk, from fire-lit dens filled with mercenaries and gamblers to polished inns where merchants dined under chandeliers of iron and glass. The guilds held sway here—the Fighters' Guild offering contracts of blade and shield, the Merchants' Guild brokering disputes of coin and goods, and the Nobles' Quarter rising above them all in its arrogance of marble courtyards and guarded halls. Yet not all of Goldor gleamed. Beyond its fishery and tannery, the slums stretched ragged, where smoke hung thicker, roofs sagged low, and children with bare feet ran along alleys stinking of river mud.

Its people were as varied as its streets. Traders with bright eyes and louder voices. Fishermen hardened by river storms. Foreign mercenaries, cloaked and scarred, drinking their coin away. And cloistered priests whose robes whispered of faiths older than the city itself. Goldor was alive—restless, hungry, and thriving.

By the time the party trudged up to its great southern gate, evening light slanted across the stone, gilding the watchtowers in gold. The guards there, clad in chain and tabards of gray-blue, lowered their halberds as the ragged adventurers approached.

"State your business," one barked, eyeing them with a mixture of suspicion and disinterest.

Before Ardan or Cyra could weave some careful word, Gundur stomped forward, mud crusting his boots, smoke still curling from his pipe. His beard bristled as he spoke with his booming voice.

"Our business?" he rumbled. "We've been walking half-starved through woods and rain. We've fought beasts, witches, and worse, and what we want now is food. We've come to eat this city bare—your bread, your stew, your ale, your roasted meats. All of it. Every last damn crumb." He jabbed a thumb back at the party. "But don't worry. We'll not cause you trouble, so long as our bellies are filled. We're only hungry travelers passing through."

The guards exchanged looks, one suppressing a grin at the dwarf's bluntness. At last the halberds lifted, and the gates creaked open to reveal the bustle of Goldor beyond.

The party crossed the wide stone bridge over the river and entered the bustle of Goldor proper. The streets buzzed with hawkers shouting their wares and carts rattling over cobbles, but the first thing they looked for was not a market stall, nor a guild hall—it was a tavern. And soon enough, the carved sign of the Golden Sheep swung before them, the painted ram looking fat and smug in the setting sunlight. Without a word, Gundur stomped toward the door, the others following.

Inside, the tavern was warm and thick with the smell of roasting meat, garlic, and beer foam. A fire crackled in the stone hearth, the beams above blackened from years of smoke. Patrons filled the room with a low, steady hum of chatter and clinking mugs.

The party made straight for the counter, where Milonda, the broad-bellied innkeeper, wiped her hands on her apron. She gave them a once-over, clearly used to travelers with mud on their boots and hunger in their eyes.

“Food,” Gundur growled, slamming a hand on the counter. “Massive portions. Pork, potatoes, anything green you’ve got. Double soups. And ale. Buckets of it.”

Milonda blinked at him, then laughed and nodded. “A hungry lot, I see. Sit yourselves down —I’ll feed you like kings.”

They dropped into chairs at a heavy oak table, and soon the feast came. Platters of roasted pork glistening with fat, heaping bowls of potatoes, carrots, and greens, loaves of bread still steaming from the oven, and mugs of foamy ale. They fell on it like wolves. Indra ate with a quiet intensity, but even she looked content as she polished off two bowls of soup and most of a pork hock. Gundur downed ale after ale, grease shining on his beard, until he staggered up and marched to the counter again.

He leaned across, shoved his waterskin toward Milonda, and barked, “Fill it. Ale, not water.” Then, snatching a fresh bun from the counter, he bit half of it in one go. “Don’t worry—we’ll pay you for all of it.”

Milonda rolled her eyes but did as asked, muttering, “And here I thought dwarves were polite folk.”

Back at the table, Cyra pushed his empty bowl away and leaned back, lighting his pipe. “We could’ve eaten three days on what we just devoured,” he muttered, puffing out a cloud of smoke.

“Three days?” Korin said dryly, puffing his own pipe. “Gundur just ate three days’ worth on his own.”

“Better in me than in some kitchen pot,” Gundur belched, the sound rumbling like a drumbeat. The stench of ale that followed made Indra wrinkle her nose.

“You’re a foul beast,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Better a beast than a twig,” Gundur shot back, tearing another hunk of bread.

Ardan chuckled softly, shaking her head. “This is the song of life—food, fire, smoke, and quarrels. Better than silence, eh?”

As the party settled into their feast, the tavern’s other voices slowly came into focus. In the corner, a bard plucked a soft tune from his lyre, weaving gentle notes that floated through the air. A tall man cloaked in black sat far back, a pipe glowing in the dimness as he drank and read from a thick leather book, his sharp eyes lifting every so often to study the room.

At another table, a halfling and an elf leaned close, whispering and giggling over private jokes. Their laughter was light but their eyes darted around with a slyness that did not go unnoticed. Nearby, a merchant devoured his plate as though afraid someone might steal it, shoveling food in with both hands. Across from him, two women clinked mugs and rolled dice on the table, their voices loud and their laughter rough.

Behind the counter, Milonda bustled from table to table, dropping plates and mugs with surprising speed for her size. When the rush pressed too hard, she darted through the kitchen doors, where an elf kitchen-hand worked tirelessly, peeling potatoes and glancing toward the tavern every so often with curious eyes.

“Think she’ll charge us double for the trouble we’re causing?” Korin asked, leaning back with his mug.

“Bah,” Gundur said, stuffing the last of the bun into his mouth. “If she tries, I’ll arm wrestle her for the bill.”

Indra smirked faintly, setting her mug down. “She’d win.”

That made even Ardan laugh.

The Golden Sheep had grown warm and hazy with drink, the smell of roasted pork fat and woodsmoke still clinging to the rafters when the tall man in the black cloak rose from his corner. He tucked his book beneath one arm, puffed a lazy ring of smoke from his pipe, then

strode across the floor with a confidence that was almost theatrical. He bowed stiffly before the party's table, his dark eyes glinting in the firelight.

"Name's Magor," he said smoothly, voice carrying a practiced charm. "You folk look like the kind who travel far and wide. Perhaps, then, you'd be interested in a bit of business. Not swords, not blood, but coin."

He leaned on the table with both palms, lowering his voice as though confiding a secret. "Spice trade. A clean fortune for those who know how to turn it."

Cyra raised an eyebrow, his ale cup still in hand. "Spices? We're no merchants, stranger. We deal in steel and spell, not pepper."

But Magor didn't falter. He began moving as he spoke, circling the table like a hawk lecturing prey, words spilling in smooth rhythm. He described seven spices with wild enthusiasm.

"There is Firepepper, red as embers, sharp enough to clear your nose and set a dull stew alive. Then the Blue Blossom root—ground fine, it keeps meat fresh twice as long. Moonseed flakes—add them to wine and you'll swear you're drinking the stars. Sweetleaf powder from the southern coasts, gentle and honeyed. Blackthorn husks, bitter as death, but mixed right they bring strength to weary bones. Embercress, golden and hot, prized by nobles for its bite. And lastly, Dewroot resin—healers covet it, a balm against fevers."

He spoke with wide sweeps of his arms, gesturing to the ceiling beams as though maps and charts were spread before him. "Prices rise in winter, when the caravans cannot cross the mountains. In Goldor's market you can buy for three silver and sell in Rivermarch for seven. I once bought a crate of Blue Blossom for thirty gold and sold it to a desperate apothecary for eighty. A single wagon can double its worth in one journey if you know the timing!"

Magor moved from one side of the table to the other, speaking directly to Indra, then Korin, then even stooping beside Gundur. "Opportunity, my friends, waits for those bold enough to seize it!"

Ardan gave a patient nod, but her eyes were already half-lidded with ale. "Fascinating… but we are not traders, Magor. Your venture would be wasted on us."

Gundur let out a rumbling belch and thumped his fist on the table. "If I wanted pepper, I'd roast a boar in the woods. We're no spice-sellers."

Even Cyra's usual sharp eyes had dulled with fatigue, and he waved dismissively. "Go find a merchant. We've fought wolves and worse in these woods, and you speak of soup garnish."

Magor smiled, bowed once more with a flourish of his cloak, and slipped away into the crowd. His smoke trail lingered behind him as he returned to his corner, then soon after left the tavern entirely.

The party slouched back into their cups, ale numbing their exhaustion. The bard's lyre lulled the air, patrons muttered at their tables, and laughter rose from the dice game in the corner. For a time they drank in silence.

After some while, Gundur stood, swaying, and stomped up to Milonda to settle the bill. He tugged at his belt for his coin purse—then froze. His calloused fingers found nothing. He checked again, patting his sides, digging in his pouch. His face darkened like a thundercloud.

"By the Abyss…" he growled, staggering back to the table. He dropped to his knees, peering under the chairs and flipping through his backpack. Nothing. He straightened with a snarl. "My purse is gone. A hundred gold—vanished!"

Indra looked up, frowning. "Dropped it?"

"I don't drop coin," Gundur spat, his eyes blazing. "That snake Magor—he lifted it!"

Korin, grim as ever, checked his own purse, then paused. "Ardan…"

Ardan's face paled as she rifled through her cloak. Her pouch was gone too. "One hundred thirty-eight gold. Gone."

The table fell silent a moment, the sounds of the tavern still bustling around them. Then Gundur slammed his fist on the wood. "I'll gut him like a boar if I see him again. That cloak-swaddled thief will pay."

Cyra sighed and reached into his pack, producing a smaller purse. "Lucky for us, Indra, Korin, and I carry spares. Three hundred gold between us. Enough to cover food and rooms. But we can't let that swindler vanish into the night."

Indra's lips curved in a cold smile. "The forest has a way of returning debts. If Magor crosses our path again, his spice talk won't save him."

Korin lit his pipe with deliberate calm, smoke curling over his shoulder. "Fate circles back on those who take what isn't theirs. One way or another, he'll find his end."

Ardan let out a weary breath and nodded. "Perhaps. For now… we rest. But Magor has planted his shadow among us, and shadows rarely leave without cost."

The party fell silent again, sipping the last of their ale, each lost in their thoughts—yet bound by the same vow, silent or spoken: if they met Magor again, blood would answer for gold.

The morning bells of Goldor tolled faintly through the stone streets, and in the Golden Sheep tavern the party stirred awake in the comfort of their shared chamber. Steam from hot baths still clung to their skin and hair; their muddy cloaks and breeches had been scrubbed and laid out to dry by the fire overnight. For the first time in weeks, they felt clean.

Five beds, one room—it was cramped, but already the place had the feel of a temporary home. Gundur stretched wide, cracking his shoulders, and grumbled with satisfaction as he reached for his pipe.

Downstairs, Milonda greeted them with another round of hearty meals. They ate thick loaves of bread with roasted pork, boiled potatoes, and turnips—washed down with cold water. Only Gundur demanded a flagon of dark ale with his plate.

“Breakfast is meant to harden your bones, not your head,” Ardan muttered.

Gundur snorted, lifting his mug. “Ale *is* bread in a cup.”

After feasting, they strapped on their gear and headed out into Goldor’s bustling market square. The shouts of vendors, the smell of fried fish, the gleam of metal at smiths’ stalls—it was alive with trade. They found a wealthy cloth merchant willing to buy their silks, moonstone anklets, and silver mirror at fair prices.

“Two bolts of Elven silk—200 gold,” the merchant said, weighing the cloth carefully. “Mirror—25. Anklets, 75. And this veil...” He pinched the black scarf between his fingers, his eyes narrowing. “Strange weave. A rare piece indeed. I will offer 300 gold.”

Korin glanced to the others. “Fair enough. We’ll take it.”

When the coin was counted and purses refilled, they shared the spoils equally. Gundur hefted his new pouch with a grin and immediately slid it into his belt, patting it every so often to make sure it hadn’t vanished.

“No rat’s going to lift my gold again,” he muttered.

Ardan tucked her pouch beneath her tunic, the cord tied tight. “Lesson learned—this city swarms with hands as light as shadows.”

From there, the party wandered to the armorer’s, where polished breastplates, gleaming helmets, and chain shirts hung from wooden stands.

“Price for this plate?” Gundur asked, laying a calloused hand on a polished cuirass.

The armorer eyed him. “Seven hundred gold, dwarf.”

Gundur barked a laugh. “Ha! For that coin I’d expect it to polish itself.”

Indra ran a hand along a suit of leather inlaid with bronze rivets. “Fine work. But for now, beyond our reach.”

Cyra squinted at a mail shirt. “One day, though… I’ll have something that won’t turn to ash when fireballs start flying in close quarters.”

That remark earned Gundur’s sharp glare. “Aye. See you don’t singe me again.”

The party asked about Magor, but every time the name was spoken, they were met with puzzled faces and shrugs. No merchant, no guard, no beggar knew of him.

“Fake name,” Korin muttered. “A cloak with no shadow.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Gundur said, puffing on his pipe as they walked on. “If I see that rat’s face again, I’ll remember.”

They drifted from street to street under the sun, through the noble quarter where guards in polished armor patrolled in pairs, then down into the slum where hungry children played in the muck and the air stank of tanneries.

Back in the market square, the voices of traders rang clear again, mingling with the songs of street performers and the calls of fishmongers hawking their catch. The city revealed itself not in stone, but in sound and smell—rich and poor, coin and shadow, all twined together in Goldor’s beating heart.

Korin paused at a fountain, running his fingers through the cold water. “Cities… always restless. Even the stones don’t sleep.”

“Then let them stay restless,” Gundur grunted. “As long as the food keeps coming.”

Indra tucked a flower behind her ear and glanced toward the river where boats drifted lazily. “The forest whispers differently than these walls, but… perhaps there is some beauty here.”

Ardan folded her arms, surveying the busy streets. “Every place has its pattern. Goldor’s is coin. Gold—or nothing.”

Cyra smirked, already fingering through his spellbook. “And we’ll see how much coin this city can bleed before we move on.”

The heavy doors of Drathmor’s Helm creaked open as the party entered the fighter’s guild. The hall smelled of sweat, steel, and fire oil from the training pits where guild members sparred. Weapons lined the walls—battered shields, axes with notches, swords polished to a gleam. At the far end, on a dais beneath the guild’s banner, stood **Irit**, the towering human guildmaster. His bald head caught the lantern light, his arms thick as stone pillars, and his eyes—cold and sharp—studied the party in silence.

For a long moment, he said nothing, simply folding his arms and gazing at each one of them as though weighing their worth, or weighing if he could kill them all by himself. Finally, he spoke, his voice deep and even.

Irit said. “What brings you to *my* hall?”

Korin stepped forward, calm and sure. “We’re looking for work. Our blades are sharp, our fire burns hot. Fighters Guild might find use in us.”

Irit tilted his head, eyes narrowing. Then, to their relief, he gave a short grunt of approval. “Perhaps. Not much on my plate right now—but one noble has been pestering me with complaints. Sent word thrice. Something about his estate outside the city. Not my business, but I’ll send you. His name’s Lord Picard. Lives up on Mavar Street, stone house with a yellow banner—dagger and cup on it. You’ll find it. He’s the sort who talks long, so keep your patience.”

The party bowed their thanks, and soon they were weaving their way through Goldor's bustling streets into the noble quarter. Mavar Street was wide and cobbled, lined with tall houses and decorated balconies. Eventually they spotted the yellow banner and the guard posted in front.

The guard, a plump man with a badly-fitted breastplate, blocked their way. He squinted and raised a hand, puffing out his chest as if he were a general instead of a doorpost.

Guard said. "Hold on there, who are you and why are you here? You selling cabbages? No? Hm. Then tell me, are you the rightly born of this land? And do you have written permission from… from… ? No? That seems suspicious."

Gundur groaned loudly. "By Moradin's beard… this dolt's guarding a noble's house?"

Guard said. "Answer the question. Do you, or do you not? There can be danger, you know."

Indra crossed her arms. "We don't have a.... We have patience, thinning fast."

The back-and-forth dragged for half an hour, the guard inventing more absurd questions: "Can you prove you're not assassins? Do you prefer nobles quarter or slums? How many people have you killed?" Finally, after Korin's dry retort—"More than me, which is to say none worth counting"—the guard relented.

With a sniff and a mutter of "I'll have to tell the master," he stepped aside and shuffled inside. At last the party was ushered into a richly furnished common room. A roaring fire warmed the hall, carpets cushioned their boots, and carved oak chairs invited rest. They sat, waiting—long enough that Gundur began muttering about stabbing the next fool who kept them idle.

Then, Lord Picard descended the stairs. A tall, thin noble with sharp features and a smug smile, he carried himself like the world orbited around him.

"Ah, forgive the wait," he said, adjusting his fine robes. "I was busy expanding my library. Acquired a new cabinet, quite sturdy oak, polished myself. You see, I pride myself on my collection—it spans generations! My great-great-great grandfather, Pligus the Elder, was a scholar of renown. Among my shelves rests *The Codex of Halved Truths*, *The Amber Bestiary of Three Hundred Beasts*, and even *The Twelve Discourses of Dawnlight*. Priceless works, I assure you."

The party exchanged tired glances, but Picard continued, clearly in love with his own voice.

He poured himself a crystal goblet of deep red wine and filled cups for the party as well. Then he clapped his hands, calling out. "Servant! Bring grapes, cheese, figs—yes, the good ones, not the bruised ones—and bread. Quickly now, our guests are weary."

At last he sat opposite the party, swirling his wine. "Now then. What brings *you* here?"

Korin leaned forward. “Guildmaster Irit sent us. He said you had… complaints about your estate.”

“Ah!” Picard exclaimed, his voice filling the chamber. “Yes, yes, my *estate*. A jewel of land beyond the city walls, nestled by the river’s bend. You see, it was won by my forefathers in glorious service to the crown—my great-grandfather Picard the Bold cut down fifteen bandits in single combat and was granted those lands in reward. My family has tended them ever since. Rich fields, orchards of apple and plum, vineyards… oh, the wine! The history of our house is written in every stone and vine.”

As he prattled on about orchards and noble deeds, Gundur leaned close to Cyra and muttered under his breath:

“Bet this one’s never held a sword in his life, except to point at cheese.”

Lord Picard leaned back in his velvet chair, swirling his goblet of wine as though it were liquid treasure. His lips curled into a pleased smile, and with a flourish of his hand, he began again, voice smooth as butter and twice as thick.

“Ah, the wines of House Picard…” he sighed, pausing for effect, “…have been praised from here to the Silver Coast. Not the sharp, biting vintage you find in the low taverns of Goldor, no. Ours is wine that lingers, warm, mellow, a draught of memory itself. Why, one sip of our Amberveil Red and you’ll swear you taste the summer sun caught in each grape. The Moonpetal White—delicate, a whisper of pear and honey—and the Duskthorn Noir, bold, dark, with the bite of iron in it. My great-grandfather himself cultivated those vines, his own hands pruning each branch, turning the soil by lantern light. He would speak to the grape trees as though they were children, promising them glory in the bottle. And glory they gave.”

He plucked a cube of cheese from the plate, chewed noisily, and chased it with another gulp of wine. His fingers left a greasy smear on the goblet as he continued without pause.

“You see, the land was once nothing but forest—wild, tangled, unfit for a noble house. But my ancestors were not men to be deterred. They cleared every last tree, rolled aside stones so large it took a dozen oxen to move them. And then, the masons came. Oh, not your common laborers—no, these were the finest stonemasons of the southern kingdoms. They cut and carved until the estate rose like a jewel, stone fitted so precisely you could not slip a hair between them. Arched halls, pillars with griffons etched into them, windows framed with ivy. Even the well was ringed with carved lion heads spouting water.”

Indra sipped her wine politely, her face betraying neither interest nor boredom, though her eyes slid briefly to the fire. Gundur, on the other hand, had already stuffed three more pieces of cheese down his throat, his beard dusted with crumbs.

Picard went on, voice swelling as if he were reciting a holy scripture. “Every summer, the servants gather in the press house, baskets overflowing with grapes. Bare feet crush them in vats of polished oak while the air is heavy with the perfume of the harvest. The juice runs red and gold into carved stone channels, where it is captured and sealed in casks. Each barrel is

marked with my family crest, the dagger and the cup. And oh! When it is aged—five, ten, even twenty years—the taste becomes something beyond mortal speech."

He leaned closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially, though it carried all the same. "Even kings have envied our cellars. The Duke of Varron once offered my grandfather two hundred gold for a single cask of Amberveil, and he was refused. Family pride cannot be bought."

He snapped his fingers for more cheese, and the servant girl hurried in with another plate. "My niece, Milana, adores the summers there. A sweet child—takes after her grandmother, graceful and gentle. She runs barefoot through the vines, singing, plucking the first grapes of the season. The servants dote on her, of course. We all do. She has brought laughter back to the estate, where my grandmother, the Lady Elayne, once walked those very gardens. Did you know she planted them herself? Orchards, hedges, rose-arches taller than men. Every bloom a memory of her hand."

Picard's voice rose again as he gestured broadly with his goblet, sloshing wine onto the carpet. "Thirty servants keep the estate running year-round! So vast is the house that even I have lost my way within it at times—thirty chambers, a gallery of portraits, a music hall. Herald, my dear servant, strums the lyra there at dusk. I sit in the high chair, wine in hand, and listen as the sunset turns the vines to fire. It is perfection. My family's triumph. A legacy that endures."

He stopped at last to cram another wedge of cheese between his teeth, then sat chewing noisily, nodding as if to punctuate his own magnificence.

The party sat in silence, sipping their wine. Ardan raised an eyebrow at Korin, who gave the faintest smirk. Gundur belched, content, and reached for more cheese.

Picard swallowed loudly, dabbed his lips with a napkin, and leaned forward. "Now then… I imagine Guildmaster Irit sent you to hear of the trouble at this glorious estate of mine."

Lord Picard, cheeks ruddy from wine, leaned forward in his chair and lowered his voice to a grave tone—as if at last, something of substance was to emerge.

"My dear guests," he began, swirling the wine, "Milana—my beloved niece—has heard… noises. Strange things in the dark, out in the vines and by the old cellars. Footsteps where no man walks, whispers where no lips move. One of my servants—Herald's brother, a stout lad—was mauled not a fortnight past. Lost his hand, poor boy! Swears something came at him from the shadows, though he never saw what it was."

Indra leaned forward slightly. "What kind of attack?"

Picard flapped his hand impatiently. "Sharp, sudden, brutal. That's what he managed before passing out in shock. But what troubles me most is the cellar. You see, beneath the estate lies an ancient tunnel system. Older than my house, older than Goldor itself—by all accounts predating any map or record. Lord knows who dug them or why. They run far, connecting to

gods-know-where, twisting beneath the earth like roots. I've never dared send servants deep in there. And if I'm to believe the whispers, something stirs below."

Gundur grunted, empty goblet in hand. "And you want us to do the stirring instead."

"Precisely!" Picard slapped the armrest. "But it must be done with the utmost discretion. If word of this spreads to the city…" His eyes darted toward the door as though guild inspectors lurked just outside. "The Guild of Traders—led by that vulture, Nirod—would leap on it. Safety violations, they'd call it. They'd fine me, seize my cellars, even suspend trade! Nirod lives for such opportunities. He wears his smile like a dagger sheath, but beneath it? Pure malice. He courts the bakers, the cloth merchants, even the fishermen, promising them protection in exchange for coin. He's built a web, I tell you. A web!"

He leaned closer, stabbing the air with his finger. "That man has every inspector in his pocket. They'll show up with their ink-stained ledgers and their hollow threats, bleed me dry, and drink my wine while they do it. No, no—this cannot reach his ears. Not a whisper. If you clear the tunnels and ensure my vines are safe, I'll pay handsomely. But quiet hands, do you understand?"

Ardan asked calmly, "And what of the Fighters Guild? Why not summon men sooner?"

Picard's face flushed. "Because Irit is as slow as an ox in mud! Three months I have begged that great oaf, and three months he dithered! 'No capable fighters in the city,' he says. Bah! He's too busy flexing his arms and polishing his helm. Irit has all the subtlety of a warhammer. He could not negotiate with a child at market. But you—yes, you seem sharp. Capable. Discreet."

He clapped his hands loudly, making the servant girl jump. "Fruit! Sweets! And bring the Ashenvale Reserve, the 18-year bottle!"

The girl hurried out, and Picard's eyes glimmered with pride as he launched into yet another brag. "While we wait… let me tell you more of my library. Ah, my true treasure. Just last season I acquired several rare tomes, a bargain struck with a merchant from the Eastern Sands. Priceless works, almost lost to time!" He raised a finger and began counting.

"'The Moon-Sung Hymns of Arkalith,' first edition, handwritten in silver ink. 'Bestiary of the Forgotten East,' bound in serpent-hide. 'Chronicles of the Hollow Sea,' which describes lands drowned centuries ago. 'The Thrice-Broken Spear,' a treatise on war written by a general who fought three wars and lost them all. And, ah—my jewel—'Veins of Fire: A Geomancer's Journey,' penned by the mad mage Teluren, who claimed the mountains spoke to him."

Cyra raised an eyebrow, puffing his pipe. "Sounds like a library that belongs in a temple vault, not a nobles home."

Picard puffed his chest proudly. “And yet it is mine! House Picard guards its treasures well. Books, wines, estates… and now, I pray, my niece and my servants safe from whatever lurks below. You’ll do this for me, yes? Quietly, quickly, and well paid, I promise.”

Korin sipped his wine, gaze steady. “If the pay matches your words, we’ll see it done.”

Picard grinned, delighted, and lifted his goblet high. “To heroes then! And to discretion.”

The servant girl returned with trays of sugared figs, honeyed nuts, and golden apples sliced thin. She laid them before the party, and Picard dug in greedily.

The fruits were sweet, the Ashenvale Reserve richer still—its velvet body clinging to the tongue, spiced with oak and smoke. The party let Picard’s voice wash over them a while longer, nodding politely at more tales of ancestors, gardens, and horses. At last, with a heavy sigh of relief, they were ushered out, armed with directions to the estate.

On the street, the night air felt clean. The cobbles shone faintly under moonlight, and the city hummed with distant laughter and cart wheels.

Gundur spat on the stones. “That noble could talk the ears off a statue. If the tunnels are half as long as his stories, we’ll die of boredom before danger.”

Cyra tugged at his beard. “Boredom doesn’t gnaw off hands. Something real is there. The question is what.”

Indra’s eyes narrowed, looking past the rooftops toward the countryside. “Old tunnels… untouched earth. Sometimes it is not beasts you fear, but what the land itself remembers.”

Ardan folded her arms calmly. “Memories buried long enough tend to surface in the strangest of ways. Perhaps these tunnels are only stone and silence—or perhaps Picard’s ancestors unearthed something best forgotten.”

Korin walked a few steps ahead, his voice dry. “Well, forgotten things tend to come cheap. Let’s hope they’re worth the coin he promised.”

They left the city walls behind, passing wheat fields that rustled in the breeze like whispers, and orchards where the first blossoms of spring clung to the branches. A footpath wound beside the river, its waters glimmering pale in moonlight. The air smelled of damp earth and the faint sweetness of apple trees.

After some time, the estate rose before them. Even after Picard’s lavish description, it surprised them—terraced gardens bursting with flowers, marble statues of ancestors gazing proudly down, and the grand house itself carved in pale stone. Servants in neat livery moved silently about, tending torches and sweeping paths.

Indra stepped forward, speaking with measured words. “Your master sent us. We are to deal with the cellar.”

The servant—a thin, sharp-eyed man—bowed and motioned them along. “Yes, my lady. The rumors are true. We have heard strange sounds at night—scraping, whispering, sometimes a deep groan that shakes the barrels. And poor Roval, he lost his hand…” The servant lowered his voice. “There is something down there. We all feel it.”

He led them to the cellar door, a squat building of age-worn stone sunk into the earth. Its heavy iron-bound door groaned as it opened, breathing out cool, damp air. Inside, rows of colossal oak barrels stood like silent guardians, their iron hoops gleaming in the torchlight. Tools for pressing and fermenting lay neatly arranged, though a thin sheen of dust suggested disuse.

The air was thick with the scent of old wood, mold, and sour grapes. Their boots echoed on the stone floor as they moved deeper. At the far end of the cellar, where shadows clustered thick, a yawning hole gaped. Part of the wall had collapsed long ago, exposing a tunnel beyond. Its ceiling hung heavy with roots, and the earth itself seemed to breathe cold into the chamber.

The party stopped before it, the darkness stretching away like a throat swallowing light.

Ardan exhaled slowly. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Gundur’s grin cut the silence. He drew his sword with a scrape of steel. “Good. Means we’re in the right place. Alright, here we go.”

He stepped forward, torchlight painting sharp angles across his scarred face. Cyra lifted the torch high, the flames flickering against the wet stone.

“Stay close,” Korin muttered, hand tightening on his bow. “If something comes from that dark, I’ll make sure it regrets it.”

Indra brushed her fingers along the wall as they entered, her voice low. “The earth does not collapse without reason. Be wary. The roots have been drinking longer than any of us have walked.”

The tunnel swallowed their voices, and the smell of soil and rot pressed in as Gundur took the lead, sword at the ready, his boots sinking into the damp ground with each step.

The air inside the tunnel was foul with damp and decay. The party moved in a tight formation, their footsteps muffled by slick, uneven stone. Gundur led at the front, his greatsword slung low, scanning the darkness ahead with eyes used to the underdeep. Cyra walked close behind him, one hand clutching his Staff of Power, the other shielding the guttering flame of their torch. Shadows leapt along the curved tunnel walls, distorted by ancient webbing that veiled the stone like brittle, amber lace.

Further back, Korin ran his fingers lightly along the wall, noting the tension of the threads—too taut, too fresh. Indra paused and knelt, brushing aside layers of dust to reveal the glint of bone. Ardan’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Something’s alive in here.”

The first sound was a click. Then another. Then a chorus—like the tapping of wet claws on hollow wood. From the blackness ahead, three massive shapes descended—horrid silhouettes of twitching legs and swollen, glistening abdomens. Their eyes reflected the torchlight like scattered coals. The Amber Queen Spiders had arrived.

With a shriek that rattled the tunnel walls, the first spider launched forward, spraying a wide cone of sticky webbing across the party. Gundur spun away in time, but Cyra was instantly snared, his arms bound in thick, golden silk. The second spider crawled across the ceiling above, mandibles clicking as it dropped down toward Indra. The third clung to the left wall, its eyes locked on Ardan.

“Now!” Ardan roared, raising her hand and casting Fireball. The explosion rocked the tunnel, incinerating strands of webbing and searing the chitinous bodies of all three spiders. Before the heat had faded, Cyra, straining against the cocoon-like webbing, tore himself free with a growl of effort and raised his staff. A second Fireball thundered through the tunnel, and the shrieks of the spiders turned shrill and violent.

The ceiling spider struck then, sinking its fangs deep into Indra’s shoulder. Venom surged through her bloodstream like ice, and she collapsed where she stood, limbs paralyzed. Nearby, Ardan shouted in pain as the third spider's bite found flesh—her arm going numb as the venom took hold. She dropped to one knee, struggling to hold on to consciousness.

Korin leapt forward to defend Ardan but missed his strike, blade clanging uselessly off the tunnel wall. Gundur, however, was already moving. With a savage cry, he brought

Earthsplitter down in a wide arc, striking the lead spider in the thorax—then again, splitting open its abdomen in a gush of ichor. It twitched violently, then went still.

Above them, the second spider scuttled closer, fangs slick with blood—but before it could descend, Cyra raised his staff again. This time, the spell was brighter, hotter—a third Fireball that erupted directly beneath the spider's belly. The creature screeched once, then fell in flaming pieces to the ground, its legs curling inward as it died.

Only one remained—the spider that had poisoned Ardan. Its legs tensed to lunge again, but Ardan, now regaining her breath and forcing her muscles to respond, drew her hand up shakily and cast another Fireball. The explosion consumed the creature in full, scorching it against the tunnel wall. As its charred corpse collapsed, Cyra stepped forward and unleashed a final surge of flame. The monster exploded in a puff of black smoke and falling limbs.

Silence returned. The only sound was the hissing of scorched silk and the shallow breathing of wounded warriors.

Gundur wiped the blade of his sword on the web-covered ground. Korin moved cautiously to Indra, helping her up as she blinked back the effects of the venom. Ardan leaned against the wall, pale but alive, while Cyra swept the tunnel with a conjured gust of wind, clearing the air of smoke.

As the party regained their composure, Korin's sharp eyes caught something glinting in the firelight. Against the wall, half-wrapped in burnt webbing, lay two skeletal corpses — clearly adventurers who hadn't been as fortunate. One wore the shredded remains of leather armor, and at his side was a silvered dagger, still clean and untouched by rust. In the other's fused belt pouch, they found a topaz gem, several gold pieces, and a sealed scroll tube bearing a wax crest no one immediately recognized.

None spoke as they gathered the items. The smell of burnt spider lingered in their nostrils, and ahead the tunnel sloped deeper, colder.

Ardan leaned against the damp wall, her skin pale from the venom still running its course through her veins. Her breath was shallow, but she steadied herself as Korin pressed a hand to her shoulder, murmuring words of cleansing power. A faint shimmer ran through Ardan's body, and the poison seemed to loosen its grip. Indra crouched nearby, clutching her side where a fang had pierced. She flinched as Korin's hand found her, the same restoration washing over her with a cool, glowing warmth.

"It is done," Korin whispered, his voice low but firm. "The poison will trouble you no more. But your strength will need time to return."

Ardan uncorked a potion and swallowed it in slow gulps, her lips curling at the bitter taste. Indra followed suit, her hand trembling slightly as she tipped back the red liquid. Color returned to their cheeks, though Indra's eyes still carried a faint shimmer of unease.

“Damn this pit of darkness,” Gundur growled, tightening his grip on his sword as he stood at the front. “I imagine every creature of the deep earth has crawled its cursed hide through these tunnels. Lord Old God knows how far down they go.”

Indra shivered, pulling her cloak closer. “I can’t tell if that was fear or the poison lingering. Either way, this place… it gnaws at me.”

Cyra adjusted his grip on the torch, the flame sputtering slightly as a draft of cold air hissed through the passage. His other hand clutched his wand. “If the darkness is endless, at least we’re walking with fire and steel. That counts for something.”

They moved slowly, Gundur’s boots heavy on the uneven ground, Cyra close behind with the torch. The flame licked the walls, catching glints of moisture on black earth and veins of stone. Roots dangled like withered fingers, brushing their faces and arms as they passed.

A sound echoed—water dripping, steady and patient, as though it had been dripping since the beginning of time. Then a low sigh of wind snaked through the tunnel, carrying with it the scent of wet stone and something faintly metallic.

The party halted. Korin raised a hand, signaling silence.

“Do you hear that?” he whispered.

“Water,” Ardan replied softly, though her voice was edged with unease. “And air. Meaning there’s space ahead… or something breathing.”

Gundur spat to the side, cursing under his breath. “If it breathes, I’ll gut it. But by the gods, this place reeks of tombs.”

Indra’s voice quivered as she spoke. “Sometimes it feels like the earth itself is watching. Like we are the intruders here.”

Cyra smirked faintly, though his eyes were sharp. “Then let the earth watch. As long as it stays quiet, I don’t care.”

The tunnel curved left, narrowing before opening into a cavern. The torchlight spread, revealing water glinting black and still. The air turned icy, their breath fogging as they stepped forward. The ground sloped into a shallow pool that stretched across the cavern, its far side lined with stone.

Gundur cursed again, dipping a boot in. “Ice cold. Figures. Nothing’s ever easy down here.” He waded in first, water rushing up to his thighs. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth. “Cold as a frost hag’s kiss. Move fast or you’ll be shivering all the way to the grave.”

Cyra held the torch high, careful not to let it touch the water. Indra hesitated at the edge, her face pale. “What if something’s in there?”

Ardan gave her a steady look. “Then we’ll find it before it finds us. We’ve come too far to turn back.”

Korin adjusted his pack and stepped into the pool after Gundur, his voice dry but steady. “Keep moving. The sooner we cross, the sooner we’re back on stone.”

The water bit into their legs like knives, each step a shudder. Roots hung low overhead, and every ripple echoed through the cavern, as though announcing their intrusion.

“Damn this place,” Gundur muttered again, sword raised as he pushed forward. “Let’s be done with it.”

The party sloshed out of the black water, boots dripping and cloaks clinging to their shoulders. Gundur shook himself like a hound, grunting curses under his breath as he stomped onto the rocky patch of ground. The torchlight flared against slick walls, the orange glow crawling across veins of stone and root, the shadows twisting with every flicker.

The tunnel yawned before them once again, narrow and uneven, breathing out a damp chill that clung to their bones. The air smelled of earth, mold, and something faintly metallic—like blood rusting on forgotten iron.

“By the gods,” Indra whispered, pulling her cloak tighter. “It feels as though the forest above has been buried here for centuries, rotting in the dark.”

Cyra tilted the torch, his eyes scanning the rough walls. “No. This isn’t rot. It’s alive. Listen —” He paused, holding his breath. The others followed suit. At first, there was only silence, then the faintest sound—like roots creaking, stretching, shifting within the walls themselves.

Ardan’s expression was calm but her voice was steady steel. “The ground moves. Always. What grows above moves below. But here… it feels different. There’s intent.”

“Intent?” Gundur snorted, rolling his shoulders and tightening his grip on his sword. “You think dirt and roots plot against us, priest? Next you’ll tell me the rocks have ears.”

Korin’s voice came low, almost like an echo in the dark. “Maybe they do.”

Gundur scowled, though his eyes flicked warily to the walls.

The tunnel sloped downward, the floor turning from packed earth to jagged stone. Every step echoed, a crunch and scrape that seemed to travel farther than it should, bouncing back like whispers of unseen feet. From somewhere deeper, a drip tapped rhythmically—slow, patient, unchanging.

Indra brushed a hand against the wall, her fingers running over damp moss and the curling threads of roots. “There is life here,” she murmured. “But twisted. I can feel it. The forest above nourishes the ground, but this… this place feeds on something else. Something old.”

Cyra gave a humorless smile. “Maybe that’s why no one dares to speak of these tunnels. Old things linger best where the sun never shines.”

Gundur spat into the dirt. “Old or not, they’ll bleed like the rest if they come at us.”

The torch sputtered as a faint breeze stirred the air, cold and wet, smelling faintly of stone dust and mildew. Korin's brow furrowed. "Airflow," he muttered. "There's space ahead. Larger chambers, perhaps. Or another exit."

"Or another grave," Indra said under her breath.

For a while they walked in silence, the tension thick. Every sound seemed magnified—the rasp of Gundur's breath, the rustle of Indra's cloak, the clink of Korin's pipe against his belt. Their shadows twisted grotesquely on the walls, shifting like figures lurking just beyond reach.

Ardan finally broke the silence. "We must remember—fear is natural. But it need not rule us. Fear sharpens the senses, keeps us alive. It is not an enemy."

"Tell that to my skin crawling," Gundur muttered.

Indra glanced at him, a faint smirk breaking her usual aloofness. "Perhaps your skin knows more than you do."

Gundur grunted, but said no more, his sword raised as he led them deeper.

The tunnel stretched on, the air growing heavier, pressing against their lungs. And still, that steady drip echoed.

The tunnel sloped downward, its stone walls narrowing as the air grew heavier. Dampness clung to every surface. The party advanced cautiously, torchlight flickering off the moss-covered bones half-buried in collapsed alcoves. Gundur led the way, his sword drawn and eyes sharp. Cyra followed close behind, firelight dancing across his staff's crystal head. Behind them moved Ardan, Indra, and Korin—silent, ready.

Then came the sound.

At first, it was faint. A click, like a loose stone shifting. Then another—scrape scrape. Soon it was unmistakable: the grating sound of bone dragging against rock.

From every crevice of the crumbling ossuary, they came. Skullgraiths. Seven in all—twisted, bipedal things with sickly oily and hairy bodies, heads of a skull. They slithered between coffin cracks and down pillars, eyes wide and soulless, limbs bending wrong.

Cyra didn't wait. He raised his hand and unleashed a Fireball, blasting the chamber in a sudden roar of flame. The explosion hit them all squarely, charring limbs and bursting two apart from the blast. Gundur charged the nearest survivor, cleaving deep into its midsection, but it clung to life with clawed hands and a shriek like cracking ice.

Indra's arrows flew—one striking perfectly through a Skullgraith's hollow eye socket, a critical hit that made it drop twitching. Another arrow followed, bringing it to its knees. Gundur finished it with a clean two-handed slash. Ardan, weaving past the chaos despite recent wounds, raised both hands and cast a second Fireball, catching every remaining enemy

in a cyclone of searing flame. When the smoke cleared, five Skullgraiths still moved, flesh now sloughing from their scorched bones—but still dangerous.

The creatures lunged back with terrible speed. One slashed into Korin's side, another clamped its teeth into Cyra's shoulder. Ardan was bitten hard, venom pulsing into her bloodstream. She gasped and faltered, paralyzed by the toxin. Korin and Cyra both recoiled, their movements slowed, stricken with a wasting disease that weakened their muscles and made every action a struggle.

Then came the worst of it—a Skull Shriek, so piercing and violent it sent a tremor through the stone. Cyra, Korin, and Ardan clutched their heads, overcome by fear. Ardan collapsed in place, stunned. For a moment, it seemed the tide might turn.

But Gundur refused to give in.

With another roar, he swung clean through one of the Skullgraiths. Indra followed with twin shots, felling another with precision. Korin lunged in, blade raised, but his swing went wide as fear clawed at his mind.

And then, silence. The last of the seven Skullgraiths burned to ash under Cyra's final Fireball.

They barely had a moment to breathe when a wet slither echoed from a crack in the stone. A final eighth Skullgraith emerged, its form slick and crackling with bone, eyes locked on Cyra's weakened form. It lunged—biting deep into his arm and slashing his side.

But the party had been through too much to falter now.

Gundur answered with a double-strike, his sword cleaving into the beast's side. Indra followed up with a brutal critical hit—an arrow that tore through flesh and embedded in the creature’s back. Wounded, twitching, it lunged once more—

—and Gundur met it head-on.

“Die, you corpse of a shit!” he bellowed, bringing his sword down in a final crushing blow.

The Skullgraith fell, twitching once before it melted into a puddle of oily blood and gristle.

Scattered among the old bones and corpses—perhaps those of previous adventurers or unlucky pilgrims—the party finds a Runed Obsidian Amulet shaped like a skull fang , two potions of greater healing in an iron flask, cork sealed with wax, ring of the Silent Guard , 57 gold, 138 silver, and a small sapphire tucked inside a rotting leather pouch, sealed scroll tube containing scroll of protection from aberrations.

Breathing heavily, the party gathered themselves. Cyra winced as he drank one of the healing potions, color slowly returning to his pale cheeks. Gundur leaned on his sword, eyes scanning the dark for more threats. Indra retrieved her arrows in silence, wiping blood from her brow.

Korin, hands trembling, reached into his pouch and pulled out a pale purple sprig of Vara’s Balmleaf, crushed it between his palms, and whispered the words of healing. One by one, he placed a hand on Cyra and then on Ardan, casting Lesser Restoration, purging the wasting disease from their bodies.

The silence that followed was complete—no movement, no breath but their own. For now, the Skullgraiths were gone.

The party ventured deeper into the tunnel for some time. The tunnel sloped downward into shadow, then they saw wooden support pillars groaning faintly under their own weight. Gundur tapped one of the beams with his sword pommel, listening to the hollow echo. “A mine,” he muttered. “Old as sin. I’ve seen this kind of shoddy carpentry in the border pits. These timbers are holding up half a mountain.”

Ardan frowned, squinting into the dark. “If this is a mine, it could stretch for leagues. We’d never find our way through every passage. It could swallow us whole.”

Indra shivered, brushing her hands along the damp wall. “Hundreds of miles of dark earth crawling with things best left untouched. We’d die long before we found daylight again.”

Korin nodded grimly. “Then we bury it. End it here before it leads us deeper into foolishness. Better to seal the wound than bleed ourselves dry.”

No more words were needed. They set to work. Gundur drove his shoulders against the nearest beam, grunting as it groaned in protest. Cyra conjured a faint spark of flame at the base of another, weakening its already rotted wood. Together, with curses, sweat, and raw muscle, they pulled the supports away one by one.

The earth trembled. First a crack, then a thunderous roar as stone and dirt collapsed into the depths. Dust filled their throats, choking and blinding them.

“Run!” Korin barked, and the party bolted back the way they had come, stumbling over loose rocks as the tunnel behind them folded in on itself with deafening crashes. They ran back through the way they came. After some time they burst out into the wine cellar coughing, filthy, and smeared with sweat and soil.

The servants were waiting, lanterns held high, eyes wide with fear. “What happened?” one cried. “What did you find?”

Cyra, still catching his breath, wiped grime from his face. “Monsters. Abominations. They were the source of your troubles. We’ve collapsed the deeper passages—they won’t return.”

The servants crossed themselves or muttered quick prayers. But Korin, still panting, wasn’t done. He pointed at the half-collapsed entrance. “Listen well. These tunnels are older than your estate, older than Goldor itself. This is an old mine, forgotten, and who knows what still crawls within. If you’re wise, you’ll seal this entrance too. Leave no crack open for the dark to seep through.”

The servants exchanged nervous glances before one nodded firmly. “Stones, then. We’ll bring the largest we can haul.”

Soon the courtyard filled with the sound of hooves and straining wagons as boulders were dragged to the cellar. The work was heavy and miserable, sweat pouring, hands blistering. Yet the party joined in, heaving and rolling stone into the entrance until the tunnel was nothing but a wall of rock.

Gundur slammed the last rock into place and collapsed against it, sweat dripping into his beard. “There. No rat, spider, or skull-faced bastard’s getting through that. Unless the earth itself gives way.”

Indra rubbed dirt from her arms, eyes narrowing at the sealed passage. “Let the dark stay buried.”

Korin smirked faintly, leaning on his bow. “Stonework can be a ward of its own. Sometimes the simplest seals are the most permanent.”

The servants bowed deeply, faces relieved at last. “You’ve done us a great service. The master will be grateful. And so are we.”

Gundur grinned, wiping his brow. “Good. Just keep the wine flowing. That’ll please me more than all the gratitude in Goldor.”

The servants ushered the weary adventurers from the cold cellar into the warmth of the great hall. Gold-chased chandeliers burned with beeswax candles, their light dancing across tapestries of hunts and harvests. The long table was already laid with platters of delicacies: soft goat cheeses with sprigs of rosemary, bowls of green and red grapes, baskets of fresh-

baked bread still steaming from the ovens. Pitchers of deep red wine stood beside carafes of fresh apple and orange juice.

Milonda's tavern fare had been hearty—but this was another world entirely. The party ate as if starved, tearing bread apart, smearing cheese thick upon it, and passing plates down the line.

And then the feast truly began. Servants arrived bearing silver trays of tender sheep meat, roasted and steaming, laid beside bowls of golden potatoes, carrots buttered and sweet, sour cabbage that cut the fat perfectly, and a dozen other vegetables, each seasoned with care. Wine flowed freely, filling goblets before they had the chance to empty.

Gundur downed his first cup in a single gulp, slamming it down with a satisfied grunt. "Now *this* is how men are meant to eat." He leaned back as another servant hurried to refill it. "Forget the tunnels. I'll stay here and guard the lord's cellar by drinking it dry."

Cyra smirked faintly as he carefully cut into his meat. "A pity monsters do not attack banquets. You'd be invincible here."

After the meal, a lean servant named Domidor arrived, his posture upright as a spear. His speech bore the cadence of older days, every word clipped and formal. "Honoured guests, if it please thee, I shall show thou the breadth of Lord Picard's halls. Tread lightly, for these stones have memory older than our master's grandsire."

He led them through long corridors, pointing out rooms one by one: the guest chambers hung with velvet curtains, the study with shelves crammed high with books bound in cracked leather, and the hall of portraits, where grim ancestors peered from gilded frames. "Here be the likeness of Lady Virelle, who in the Year of Broken Spears held the northern orchard with but six men against three score brigands," Domidor intoned, gesturing to a sharp-eyed woman in a faded oil painting.

Indra paused before another, a dour-looking man with hawk-like features. "And who is this grim lord?"

"Sir Belgar, the Iron-Hand," Domidor replied, lowering his voice. "'Tis said his touch did never warm, for he lived more in counsel with coin than with kin. Yet he built these walls, and so we honour him still."

At last, they came to the estate's hidden jewel—a mosaic pool tiled in swirling blues and greens. The party did not hesitate to strip off armor and grime, sinking gratefully into steaming water. Gundur, of course, carried in a bottle of wine and poured it down as though it were water itself, sighing with pleasure.

Indra leaned back against the edge, her dark hair fanning in the water. "I could get used to such life," she murmured with a rare smile. "Soft beds, hot baths, servants who never question. This could suit me."

Ardan chuckled, shaking her head as he floated lazily. “Don’t even dream of it. You are a woman of the wilds, Indra. We’ve no place with lords and princesses, and you’d tire of gilded cages soon enough.”

Indra’s eyes narrowed, but only faintly. “Perhaps. But tell me you’d not enjoy it for a season.”

Korin, smoking his pipe at the pool’s edge, let out a dry laugh. “Comfort makes cowards, and lords pay too dearly to keep their hands clean. Better mud and danger than growing fat in a velvet chair.”

Gundur lifted his goblet high, wine spilling into the water. “Speak for yourself! Give me roast meat, baths like this, and wine without end, and I’ll slay whatever monster Picard points me to, year after year. I was born for glory—and glory tastes better with cheese.”

Even Cyra allowed a rare smile at that, though he said nothing, eyes drifting back toward the library they’d glimpsed.

The library smelled of leather, dust, and faint candle wax—a place of quiet weight, where each tome seemed to breathe its own secrets. Cyra and Ardan stepped into the chamber, eyes drawn immediately to the towering shelves that lined the walls, packed with volumes bound in cracked vellum, dyed hides, even scales of creatures long dead. Stained-glass windows cast fractured hues across the spines, where gilded letters gleamed faintly.

Cyra’s hands moved with reverence as he pulled a thick book from the nearest shelf. Its cover bore a faded sigil—a circle of seven stars around a jagged tower. He opened it carefully, the pages brittle, script faded.

“*‘The Concord of Seven Towers,* ” he read aloud, voice tinged with awe. “A chronicle of the first gathering of high wizards after the Sundering. Here—it speaks of their pact: that none would ever weave the stars into binding chains again, lest the heavens burn. And yet… two of them broke it. No wonder the histories whisper curses at their names.”

Ardan drew another tome, its weight straining her arms. *‘The Ninefold Glyphs of Atherak’*, the title read, letters embossed in silver. She turned a page to reveal diagrams of spirals and overlapping circles. “This one records symbols meant to channel thought directly into matter. The glyphs are drawn in nine steps, each one layering intent. It claims the ninth glyph could turn flesh to stone or stone to flesh… but only if the caster believed utterly in both.”

“Belief as currency,” Cyra muttered, his eyes narrowing. “I’d wager half the ruins we’ve crossed were born from such arrogance.”

Further along, Cyra discovered a thinner volume bound in green scales, its edges singed. “*‘The Ashen Chronicle of Zharuil.* ” He flipped it open. “Zharuil, the flame-mad sage of the western deserts. He wrote of calling fire not from the air, but from beneath the earth, from seams of molten stone. Here—‘One must coax the fire like a serpent, patient and cruel, lest it turn and strike its master.’”

Ardan set aside another dusty tome, brow furrowed as she opened one more—its cover black, marked with an unblinking golden eye. "*'Whispers of the Forgotten Tongue.'*" Her voice grew quieter. "It speaks of a language said to be older than thought, known only to entities beyond time. 'One who speaks in syllables unspoken by man shall call shadows to listen, and the shadows shall answer, but never in kindness.'"

Cyra leaned over, his curiosity gleaming despite the danger. "If even a fragment is true, then the power to command such shadows—"

"—is not power we should covet," Ardan cut in, snapping the book shut. "Knowledge, yes. But there are doors better left unopened."

On the next table lay scrolls unrolled for study. *'The Almanac of Lunar Currents'*, penned in flowing elvish script, charted how moon phases heightened certain spells—waxing moons strengthening illusions, waning moons lending vigor to necromancy.

Cyra's finger trailed across another passage in *'The Lexicon of Crystal Binding'*. "Here. Instructions on weaving memory into gemstones. Imagine it—recording spells themselves into crystal, reusable, unchanging." He smirked. "Perhaps one day, we'll no longer need books at all."

Ardan gave a soft laugh. "Then perhaps the libraries will thank us by falling silent at last."

They worked for hours, drinking in ancient wisdom, their voices low, the rustle of pages filling the chamber. Beyond the door, the estate hummed with quiet life, but here only the past spoke, whispering of wizards long dead, their triumphs and their ruin.

By the time the party returned to Lord Picard's house in Goldor, torches were already burning in the windows, and the noble himself stood waiting at the grand door. He swept forward, robes trailing, a wide smile splitting his face.

"My brave champions!" he cried, spreading his arms. "Come in, come in, I have awaited your word with the patience of a saint and the worry of a father. Tell me—what news from my beloved estate?"

The adventurers were led once again into the richly adorned chamber, where the fire snapped and the goblets were already filled. They sat as Picard leaned forward eagerly, eyes alight.

"I have been told," Picard began, "that monsters were found in my very cellar! But reports are poor things. I demand specifics—every detail, every scratch, every howl. Spare me nothing."

Ardan folded her hands neatly on the table, her calm voice steady. "It was as your servants feared. The cellar tunnel opened into ancient mine shafts, perhaps centuries old. We fought creatures there—horrid things with skull faces, birthed in shadow. We collapsed the deeper tunnels and sealed the passage with stone. Nothing more will crawl from beneath your estate."

Picard's eyes widened, delight and horror mingling. "A mine? On my land? Beneath my cellars! How astonishing! And these beasts—tell me more. Were they serpents, were they spirits, or something fouler?"

Korin answered flatly. "They looked like death itself had taken shape. Whether from earth or somewhere worse, I cannot say. The mine went deeper than we dared. Too deep. If anything still lurks below, it will never reach you now. The stone holds."

Picard tapped his chin, already lost in speculation. "From the depths of the Underdeep, perhaps? Or the very bowels of hell itself! Yes, yes, I have read of such things. Demons clawing upward, lost souls gnashing at the roots of the world. My cellar, imagine it, a frontier of the eternal struggle!"

With a sharp clap of his hands, he barked, "Wine! Sweets! Grapes, figs, honeyed nuts—bring the best for our saviors!" Servants rushed to obey, carrying in trays of delicacies, the aroma of spiced fruit and candied almonds filling the air.

Indra plucked a grape from the silver plate, her face cool. "Whatever their origin, they are gone. That is enough."

Picard leaned forward again. "But how did you fight them? How did you strike such beasts down?"

Gundur slammed his goblet on the table, his grin wolfish. "How? With my bloody sword, that's how! Came at me with their skull-faces and teeth clicking, and I split one right down the middle. Sprayed its guts on the walls. Another I smashed with the flat, sent it howling like a rat. By Moradin's beard, I cursed them with every swing, and they squealed like swine before I drove them into the dirt!" He spat to the side, then tore a bite of cheese. "That's how."

Picard flinched at the vulgarity, but his fascination never wavered. "Magnificent! Magnificent indeed! A tale worthy of song. To think my humble estate has been the site of such valor. I am indebted."

He gestured to a servant, who set a heavy chest upon the table. "Your reward, as promised—one thousand gold, divided as you see fit. And a bonus—two casks of my Amberveil Red, aged fifteen years. A token of my esteem."

Cyra's eyes gleamed as the chest was opened, the gold glittering in the firelight. "A fair payment."

Ardan gave a small nod. "More than fair. You keep your word, my lord."

Picard waved a hand airily, already pouring himself another goblet. "Coin is nothing when weighed against peace of mind. But you have done more than earn it—you have given me stories to tell for years. Now eat, drink! My hall is yours tonight!"

The party leaned into the feast, wine flowing, fruit sweet, the weight of battle fading beneath velvet cushions and flickering firelight.

Lord Picard leaned back in his chair, swirling his goblet, his cheeks glowing red from wine. "Ah, yes—my library," he said, catching Cyra and Ardan's eyes. "I was told by Domidor that you both spent some time among my shelves. Fine choice. Those books are no common tomes plucked from the stalls of Goldor's market. No, no—they are treasures, gathered by Picards for generations, hand-picked, bartered for with jewels, and in some cases stolen from the very jaws of history itself."

He reached for a wedge of cheese and popped it into his mouth, chewing noisily, then washed it down with a gulp of wine. "There is *'The Emerald Index of Runes,'* written by a mad sorcerer who carved every rune into his own flesh before penning them. There is *'Wraiths of the Northern Sky,'* an eyewitness account of spirits over the ice seas—one of only two copies still surviving. And, ah—*'The Fifth Element, Lost and Found,'* a curious work indeed, claiming the ancients once mastered a substance beyond fire, water, air, and earth. Not to mention *'The Lexicon of Fading Stars,'* a book whose last ten pages vanish and reappear with the phases of the moon, and *'The Iron Testament of King Drelmor,'* a banned volume that lists spells used to twist men into beasts."

Ardan nodded politely, though her eyes sparkled with genuine interest. "A remarkable collection. No wonder one could spend days among those shelves."

Cyra smirked faintly. "More than remarkable. Dangerous, even. Knowledge like that doesn't sit quietly forever."

Picard waved a hand, grinning. "Yes, yes—dangerous and delicious. And I am pleased you made use of them. Education is a fine thing; the mind is a sword, and it must be sharpened. Should you require further access to my library, consider the doors always open to you. Few are granted such privilege. Use it wisely."

The party raised their goblets in thanks, the clink of silver echoing through the chamber. They ate, laughed, and for a time enjoyed the simple comforts of a noble table. But after a while, Picard's voice dropped lower. He leaned in, glancing over his shoulder as though the walls themselves might listen.

"My friends," he said, his tone darkening, "there is another matter that troubles me—one I trust only to those who have already proven themselves."

The party quieted. Gundur chewed noisily on a hunk of bread, but his eyes narrowed with interest.

"It is the Traders Guild," Picard whispered. "Or rather, its master—Nirod. A man greedy beyond measure, bitter as wormwood, and as hateful as any devil. He has long made a game of crushing those who prosper, pinching them for coin, bleeding them dry. A friend of mine, a fine dealer in silks, fell afoul of him. Nirod sniffed out some forged ledgers—whether they

were true or planted I cannot say—and now the man faces a prison sentence. His business gone, his life ruined."

Korin's voice came low, dry. "And Nirod has turned his gaze toward you."

Picard nodded, his jaw tightening. "Indeed. He has already threatened me thrice, demanding ten thousand gold, or else he swears he will uncover forgeries among my wine accounts—numbers that… may not stand to scrutiny." He looked away, shame flickering across his face. "I admit, I have been less than careful in certain dealings. A misplaced tax here, an altered shipment there. Nothing worth ruin. Yet to Nirod, it is enough. He has blackmailed me, and I fear he will stop at nothing."

Indra frowned. "And you believe he would send spies into your very home?"

Picard slammed his goblet down, red wine sloshing. "I *know* it. My guard spotted figures in dark hoods prowling my yard. They fled when challenged, but it is clear—they were sent to sniff through my ledgers, perhaps even plant their own evidence. Nirod has no honor, no restraint. He wields corruption as others wield swords."

Gundur growled, cracking a bone in his hand before tossing it aside. "I've known men like that. Fat rats who feed on others' sweat. Put me in a room with him and his tricks won't matter. I'll squeeze the truth out of his neck."

Ardan shot Gundur a look. "We are not executioners. This is politics, not war."

Korin exhaled smoke from his pipe, the glow of ember lighting his sharp features. "Politics *is* war. Nirod uses quills and coin instead of swords. The damage is the same."

Picard nodded vigorously. "Yes! That is what I fear. I do not know where to turn. The Fighters Guild drags its feet, the city guard licks the Traders Guild's boots, and all the while, Nirod builds his empire of shadows. If he ruins me, he will ruin others, and the city itself will rot from within."

He sagged back into his chair, shoving a handful of grapes into his mouth as if to calm himself. "This man must be stopped. But how? How does one fight a serpent that coils through every crack of power in Goldor?"

Lord Picard shifted uneasily in his chair, his fine robe twisting beneath his restless fingers. The fire snapped, throwing long shadows across the hall, and for the first time his voice faltered.

"This matter… it must be dealt with," he muttered, almost to himself. "But how? One cannot simply march up and lop off his head with a sword. No, no, that would be madness. Too many eyes, too much noise. What is needed is… different. Effective, yes, but quiet. Something where no trace of the hand remains. No whisper, no rumor."

He licked his lips, sipped wine, and lowered his gaze. "Nirod is well-guarded. In the streets, he has men with him—hard men, some of the best blades coin can buy. At his estate, there

are always two more at the gates. And yet…" He hesitated, shifting again. "Maybe… maybe… we… you… could… wills to do something about it." His voice quivered, the words slipping out as though dragging thorns. "The pay will be generous, of course. And perhaps not with the sword—not directly—maybe there is another way. A better way. A quiet way. Something… something like… maybe you know…"

He trailed off, his hands trembling slightly as he reached for his goblet.

Gundur leaned forward, his grin slow and wolfish. "I see what you mean, master. There are other ways. Quieter ways. We know stealth as well as steel. A man's house at night is no fortress if one knows how to move. And with the right touch, with something like… Blackroot, carved and pressed into liquid form…" He spat on the floor for emphasis. "Well. Such matters become simpler."

Picard's face lit up, his discomfort melting into sudden relief. His eyes shone like a child who had been spared the guilt of speaking aloud what he dared not. "Yes, yes!" he exclaimed, his voice rising with sudden eagerness. "That—that is exactly what I meant, my friends! A quiet way, indeed! If you could slip into his house at night, unseen, unheard, and this… Blackroot… yes, slipped into his wine perhaps, or bread, or whatever foul meal he stuffs into his gullet—why, it would set the whole city at ease. That man undone, gone, no longer a viper in the guild."

He reached for a red apple from the silver tray, bit into it hard. Juice sprayed onto his robe and dribbled down his chin onto the carpet. He chewed noisily, swallowing in great gulps, then leaned back, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, lost in thought for a moment.

At last he spoke again, his tone softer but steadier. "I trust you know what must be done. You are professionals—you have proven it. I leave the details to you. A plan, discreet, careful. Nirod is no simple mark. He has guards, and he is not easily approached. But I believe—no, I *know*—you are equal to the task."

He raised his goblet in trembling fingers. "Do this, and not only will you earn your gold—you will rid Goldor of a parasite that has bled it too long."

Indra's expression was unreadable, her voice cool. "Poison and shadow are not the ways of nature, but sometimes… balance requires ugly choices."

Ardan glanced to Korin, her voice quiet, logical. "This is more than a contract. It is a shift in the city's power. If we agree, we must tread carefully."

Korin exhaled pipe smoke, his dry smile faint. "Careful is our habit. Quiet, our gift. Nirod will never see us coming."

Cyra closed his spellbook with a soft snap, eyes glittering in the firelight. "Then it is settled. We'll plan. But when the time comes, it must be swift."

Picard clapped his hands with sudden joy, spilling more apple juice from his lips as he laughed. "Good, good! Then let the wine flow tonight—for soon, Goldor will breathe easier!"

The Golden Sheep had become their daytime refuge, but each night the party found themselves once again in Picard's mansion, seated around his grand fire, planning and plotting. Maps of the nobles' quarter lay spread across the table, along with scraps of parchment filled with notes on guard rotations and shadows in the streets. Every evening they ventured into the high quarter, cloaked in anonymity, and watched Nirod's stone house from alleys and hedgerows.

The pattern soon revealed itself. Two guards stood dutifully at the front doors, halberds gleaming in the torchlight. Every hour, like clockwork, one of them made a slow round around the perimeter, cutting across the garden before returning to the post. At times they exchanged a joke, or yawned, but they never strayed from their rhythm.

"It's doable," Gundur grunted one night, crouched low behind a wall. "One inside, quick and quiet, through the kitchen. The rest of us keep out, eyes sharp. Too many feet in there and it turns to noise."

The party agreed. Nirod lived with only his wife and a pair of servants—folk who likely ate scraps in the servants' quarters and not from his own table. The target was clear.

Ardan gathered the roots and herbs over the next days, grinding and pressing until she produced a single vial of dark liquid, sharp with a bitter tang. She corked it tight, her face calm as she handed it to Indra. "This is the root. A single sip is sleep forever. Be quick, be precise. Do not linger."

Indra nodded, her eyes steady. She dressed in black from head to foot, cloth wrapped over her hair and face, only her sharp eyes visible. When the night came, Gundur and Korin escorted her close to the house, crouching in the bushes across the street. The guards were at their posts, the candles in the upper windows slowly guttering out.

"It's time," Korin whispered.

Indra slipped from their side and into shadow. She padded along the cobbles until she reached the back of the house, where a stone wall rose above her. She climbed without effort, hands finding purchase in the cracks, toes pressing silently against the rock. She pulled herself over and dropped into the garden beyond with no more sound than a falling leaf.

The hedges were tall, the flowers trimmed, but she slid between them as though she were part of the night. At the far edge, she paused—the open lawn lay ahead, pale with moonlight. She darted across, moving low, her feet kissing the grass without a sound.

The kitchen window was her mark. The shutters were loose, the latch corroded. She slipped a thin dagger into the gap, nudged it, and the window gave. She slid inside.

The kitchen smelled of smoke, bread, and salt. She moved like a shadow through the racks of food, pulled the vial from her belt, and uncorked it. A few drops into the hanging sausages. A smear across a loaf of bread. And at last, a pour into the jug of wine left on the table, its red surface rippling darkly as the Blackroot mixed.

Her work complete, she pocketed the empty vial, retraced her steps, and climbed out of the window. The guards' footsteps crunched in the distance, still on their lazy patrol. She crossed the garden again, mounted the wall, and dropped down into the alley beyond.

Gundur and Korin were waiting, crouched in the hedges. Gundur's grin split wide. "Clean as a knife cut."

"Let's go," Korin murmured, and together they sneaked into the dark night.

At Picard's mansion, the noble was waiting, pacing like a caged wolf. When Indra nodded, confirming the deed, Picard's face lit with both relief and feverish glee.

"It is done? Truly done? Oh, marvelous! Marvelous indeed!" He clapped his hands furiously, calling for more wine, more fruit, more sweets. "My friends, my saviors! You have plucked a viper from my breast and crushed it beneath your heel!"

The party sat, sipping wine, their faces calm though weary.

"How long do you think till we hear?" Ardan asked, her voice quiet.

"Tomorrow at the earliest," Korin answered, puffing at his pipe. "Poison doesn't shout. It whispers. But once it speaks, the city will know."

Indra said nothing, only sipped her wine, her eyes far away.

Gundur belched and slammed down his goblet. "When it happens, let the city rejoice. And pour me another—this one's for the grave of Nirod."

Picard laughed nervously, wringing his hands and pacing. "Yes, yes! The whole of Goldor will shift! That greedy bastard undone, the Traders Guild crippled, and all of us—free! Oh, drink, drink deep, my friends, for tonight the city is ours!"

The fire in Picard's chamber had burned low, but the noble showed no signs of weariness. He paced back and forth, wringing his hands, goblet in one, apple in the other, speaking as though the very air would scatter his thoughts if he didn't.

"The Traders Guild," he said, voice fevered, "without Nirod—ah, what a different beast it shall be. A creature of trade, not tyranny! The city will breathe again. Yes, yes. Perhaps Thomider, my good friend Thomider—he is steady, long in commerce, well respected among cloth and spice. His hands are clean. Yes… yes, he would do well." He stopped, took a long swallow of wine, and then added with a nervous chuckle, "Better me not leave my house for a time. Too many eyes, too many whispers. You, my friends—you will be my ears. Go, listen in the markets, the taverns. See how the city hums when the snake is gone."

The party agreed, though none looked forward to the long night of waiting.

The morning light finally found them, weary and bleary-eyed, leaving Picard's mansion and trudging back to the Golden Sheep. They went straight to their room, boots kicked aside, armor dropped carelessly, and fell asleep the moment their heads touched the pillows.

Hours later, they woke to the smell of food. They came down to the common room and sat for a meal of lamb meat, roasted vegetables, and thick mugs of dark ale. Gundur belched before his first bite and muttered, “Better than Picard’s bloody grapes.”

As they ate, the tavern door creaked open and a stout merchant bustled in, shaking off the dust of the street. He greeted Milonda warmly at the counter, ordering an ale. His voice carried a few sentences to the parties table . “The Traders Guild will be needing a new master, eh? Mark my words, half the city will be clawing for that chair. Chaos till someone takes it.”

The party’s eyes met across the table, silent understanding in their looks.

Ardan rose after a while, her calm manner unshaken, and approached the counter. She ordered an ale and leaned casually on the wood. “What news, Milonda?”

Milonda, wiping a mug with a rag, leaned closer, her voice low but quick. “Haven’t you heard? The Guild Master himself, Nirod—dead. Found in his house this morning, with his wife. Rumors swirl—poison, some say. Others whisper demons, or curses. Nobody knows for sure. But he’s gone, that’s what matters.”

Ardan inclined her head, paid for her ale, and returned to the table. She set the mug down, looked at each of them in turn, and said simply, “Nirod is dead.”

They lifted their mugs silently, the clink of metal against metal carrying more weight than words.

Later, they strolled the market streets, where voices buzzed with the same news. Merchants muttered, customers speculated, and whispers of Nirod’s sudden end flew like sparrows in every corner. With every overheard word, the truth was nailed firmer into place.

At last, they returned to Picard’s house. He was waiting, pale but bright-eyed, like a man who had spent the day trying not to smile too broadly. When they told him the news, his face lit in full delight.

“Confirmed! Truly confirmed!” he exclaimed. “Oh, my friends, you have uncoiled the serpent’s grip from my throat! Goldor itself will thank you, though it shall never know your names.” He clapped his hands, servants rushing with wine trays. “Drink! Drink in triumph!”

He gestured, and another servant brought forth a heavy coffer, set it on the table with a thud. “Two thousand gold, as promised. Yours by right, and gladly given. A man cannot measure freedom, but he can pay for service rendered.”

Gundur dragged the chest closer with a greedy grunt, flipping it open to see the coins glimmering in the candlelight. “That’s better than grapes.”

Cyra smirked faintly, swirling his wine. “One viper down. Let’s hope another doesn’t crawl into his chair too quickly.”

Picard lifted his goblet, eyes gleaming. “Oh, let them try. For now, we celebrate. You have done what no one else could—and Goldor will never be the same again!”

The party clinked their cups with his, drinking deep, their work unspoken but finished.

The death of Nirod rippled through Goldor like a stone cast into still water. At first, whispers filled the taverns and markets—hushed talk of poison, curses, or enemies unseen—but as the days passed and no culprit was found, the city settled into a new rhythm. For the common folk, relief was palpable. Where once the markets had been choked by Nirod’s heavy hand, merchants now spoke with freer tongues. Traders smiled openly, and stalls that had been quiet under his scrutiny began to bustle with fresh wares. The air itself seemed lighter, as if the city had shed a weight no one realized they carried.

In the guild halls, politics turned restless. Nobles and traders gathered in hushed circles, debating who would claim the vacant chair. For a week the city hummed with uncertainty, each name floated and discarded in turn, but one rose above the rest: Thomider. Well respected, known for fairness in contracts and long years of service to the trade roads, he was the compromise no faction could dispute. And so Thomider was chosen, crowned as the new master of the Traders Guild, his calm hand ushering in what many hoped would be an age of prosperity.

The streets reflected the change almost overnight. Silks once held back were brought forth again, spices flowed in from the southern routes with less fear of seizure, and fishermen smiled as their catches fetched higher prices at the stalls. Coins jingled more freely, and even the slums of Goldor saw small glimmers of relief. Nobles in their halls toasted to “free air in the city,” though few dared say Nirod’s name aloud, preferring to speak of shadows gone and burdens lifted.

Still, not all voices were quiet. Nirod’s kin—distant cousins and two nephews who had profited from his schemes—began their own investigations. They hired discreet scribes and questioned servants, searching for even a whisper of foul play. But no trace appeared. The guards at his house swore they had seen nothing, no mark of forced entry, no strange figure in the night. The bodies, found in their bed, told only of sudden, silent death. The city moved on.

For Picard, opportunity bloomed. With Thomider as master, old ties turned to golden favors. Wine that had once been taxed and inspected with suspicion now flowed easily into the markets, its price climbing higher than ever. His name, once under Nirod’s thumb, found new strength in the guild, whispered with respect in corners where before it was scorned.

And so Goldor thrived. The river glimmered with new barges, laden with trade; the forges rang louder, crafting goods for fresh caravans; and the taverns filled with laughter. The shadow of Nirod faded into rumor, and though a few still muttered of his sudden end, most spoke only of fortune—of the city’s breath unchained.

The party decided it was time to put their hard-earned gold into safer keeping. One morning, after a simple breakfast of bread and stew at the Golden Sheep, they gathered all their coin

and valuables, strapping it into bundles and satchels, and made their way to the Goldor city bank.

The bank itself was not grand like those in larger cities, but it carried the quiet air of trust. Its walls were thick stone, its windows barred with iron, and the clerks inside moved with a careful dignity. The master of the establishment was a stout man named Calmin, a friend of Picard, who greeted them with warm courtesy.

“You will find no safer place in Goldor for your coin,” Calmin assured, dipping his quill into ink. “We will hold it secure, pay a fair interest, and release it as you need. Whether you wish to draw small sums for food or greater amounts for enterprise, your names will carry weight in this ledger.”

The party deposited their wealth—gold, silver, and trinkets—into a holding account. Cyra oversaw the numbers with sharp eyes, ensuring every coin was counted. Indra said little, but her gaze lingered on the locked iron chests behind the counters, as if measuring their strength. Gundur muttered, “As long as no rat gnaws through the wall, I’ll trust it.”

From then on, the bank became a quiet rhythm in their lives. When coin was needed for meals or rooms, they visited Calmin’s clerks, withdrawing modest sums. Interest accrued slowly, but steadily, and it pleased Ardan to see their fortune not dwindling with tavern living.

Their days in Goldor were simple, modest, yet comfortable. Gundur made a habit of planting himself in the corner of the Golden Sheep with his dark ale and pipe, bellowing laughter when he was not grumbling at the state of city life. Cyra and Ardan often slipped away, spending afternoons in Picard’s library, poring over tomes of wizardry, histories of the realm, and obscure records of the old dynasties. Indra sometimes joined, though more often she wandered the city markets in silence, watching the flow of life.

At times they dined with Picard himself, seated once more at his bountiful table, where the noble poured wine with gusto and spoke of trade with growing pride. One evening, between mouthfuls of roasted duck, he leaned across the table with a conspiratorial smile.

“My friends,” he said, “your skills with blade and fire are wasted in idleness. I have caravans of silks, spices, and wine moving through this city each week. Guard them for me, keep them safe from the dogs and rogues who would prey upon them, and you will be paid handsomely. A hundred gold per week, split as you please, and you will live with coin in pocket and food on table.”

Gundur slammed his fist down on the table, nearly toppling a goblet. “Now that’s work I can drink to! Guarding wagons and smashing skulls when needed—aye, that’s worth my time.”

Korin, puffing his pipe, nodded. “Steady work is not to be scorned. Better a caravan guarded than a man’s purse emptied.”

Ardan gave a small smile. “And it keeps us close to the city’s heartbeat. Guarding trade is as much about listening as it is fighting.”

Cyra raised his goblet. “Then let it be so. We’ll guard your wagons, Picard, and let the city see that your silks and wines pass unscathed.”

Picard beamed, clapping his hands. “Splendid! Then it is settled. You’ll have work as long as you wish it—and my gratitude besides.”

So their days found a rhythm—gold stored in safe walls, modest meals in the tavern, evenings of wine and study, and steady coin earned from guarding Picard’s wares through the bustling streets of Goldor.

The day had been bright and lively in Goldor’s market. Merchants shouted over one another, hawking silks, dried fish, and glittering trinkets, while the air buzzed with the calls of buyers haggling for better deals. Indra moved with her usual quiet grace, her eyes more on the movement of the crowd than on the wares. That was when a halfling woman brushed against her hip, her hand fast as a striking snake. By the time Indra felt the sudden lightness at her belt, the thief was already bolting.

Indra’s voice cut through the market, sharp and furious. “Not again—catch the little shit!”

The halfling darted like a shadow, weaving between carts, slipping under wagons, her bare feet slapping cobblestones as she vanished down side alleys. The party gave chase, scattering market-goers in their wake. Gundur crashed into a fruit stand, sending apples tumbling, while Korin slipped into a muddy puddle, his boots sucking at the filth as he cursed. Indra nearly caught the thief at one turn, only to scrape her arm against a rusty nail sticking out of a crate as the halfling slid away once more.

The pursuit carried them all the way to the slums, where leaning shacks and rotting timbers replaced stone walls. At last, the thief ducked behind a sagging wooden house and vanished through a hatch. By the time the party reached it, the only sign left was the hatch door, swaying on its hinges.

Panting and cursing, they dropped into the sewers.

The air struck them first, cold and heavy with rot. Their boots splashed into knee-deep water that reeked of human waste, clotted filth clinging to every step. Moss coated the walls, slick and glistening, while drops of water fell in slow, mocking rhythm from the cracked ceiling.

Gundur gagged, his voice echoing in the damp tunnel. “Damn this halfling! A shit crawler, that’s what she is. How in the nine hells are we supposed to find her in this mess?”

Korin drew a torch from his pack, striking flint until it caught. The small flame lit the narrow corridor in flickering orange, casting long shadows across the slick stone. “One step at a time. She can’t vanish forever. Sewers are a maze, but every maze has its exits.”

Indra wrinkled her nose, her face pale. “She knows these tunnels better than we do. We’ll be chasing her blind unless we’re careful.”

Cyra lifted his robes slightly, grimacing as the sewage swirled around his boots. “This is beneath me—literally. But if the wretch thinks she can steal from us and hide in dung, then let her drown in it. I’ll burn the whole sewer dry if I must.”

Ardan’s voice was calm but taut, her eyes scanning the walls. “Haste will do us no good. The smell masks sound, the water masks tracks. She may already be circling us. We must stay sharp.”

Gundur growled, his hand tightening on his sword hilt. “If I catch her, I’ll wring her little neck till her eyes pop. First Magor robs me, now this rat? I’ve had enough of thieves.”

Indra shot him a look. “Alive, Gundur. She runs with a purpose. She might not be working alone.”

Korin raised the torch higher, illuminating a junction where three tunnels met, each stretching into shadow. “Left, right, or straight. Place your bets.”

Ardan frowned. “Straight leads deeper, right bends with the current, left against it. If she’s clever, she’ll go right and let the filth carry her scent away.”

Cyra smirked. “Or she’ll go left, thinking we’ll expect her to be clever. Either way, we’ll find her. No rat can hide forever.”

They stood in the flickering torchlight, the stink of the sewers pressing in on them, listening to the faint echoes in the tunnels, uncertain which path hid the halfling who had snatched their coin.

The walk in the sewers had been slow, the slick stone floors slippery, the air rank with decay and the hiss of stagnant water. Their torchlight flickered against walls caked in moss and calcified mold. As they pressed forward, the whispers began — too soft to be words at first. Then more distinct. They heard them.

“Gundur…”
“Korin… Ardan… help me…”

The party stopped dead. It was their own voices — mimicked perfectly — echoing from the darkness. Shadows above moved unnaturally. Indra spun, bow already drawn.

From the ceiling, from cracks in the walls, and out of the water like living vomit — Callwretches. A dozen in all, slick and warped with pale flesh and crooked claws. Their movements were twitching, unpredictable. Some crawled across the ceiling, others slithered through the slosh of shallow crypt water. Every one of them hissed with the voice of someone they knew.

Cyra didn’t wait. His hand lit with fire, and with a thunderous roar, he unleashed a Fireball that blasted half the chamber in a bloom of heat and burning rot. Four of the creatures were charred to blackened husks immediately, but the rest were already moving, dropping from the ceiling and rushing the party in a coordinated, horrific shriek.

Gundur met one head-on, sword flashing. His blade cleaved into the ribcage of a lunging wretch, and then again into its shoulder, staggering it. Indra’s arrows flew past him, each striking with precision — one in the throat, another through the lower jaw of a wall-crawling beast that had been moving for Cyra.

Then one of them landed hard, grappling Cyra and dragging him toward the black pool near a crumbled wall. Its flesh bubbled with acidic slime, burning through cloth and skin. He vanished for a moment — and then reappeared in a shimmer of Misty Step, free and furious, launching a scorching ray of fire into the thing’s face.

Around them, claws scraped stone. Gundur turned, striking down another, and Korin’s sword was a blur in the dark, hacking at a second that had gone for Indra’s side. But even as they fell, the Callwretches clawed back. Cyra was slashed open and infected by some rotting sickness that clung to his blood. Indra, too, was struck — her limbs trembling as the same rot began to take root. Ardan stood behind the wall of the fray, arms raised, forming a glowing Wall of Force that sealed off part of the chamber, cutting three more Callwretches from the melee.

Korin’s arrows drove one down with grim precision. Ardan loosed Magic Missiles that tore a sickly creature into twitching pieces. One Callwretch attempted to grapple Indra again but

was blasted back by a firebolt to the chest. Gundur's blade never stopped — he cleaved one straight through, then turned, catching another mid-leap and cutting it down in a single arc.

The remaining Callwretches pounded on the force wall, gibbering with half-human voices and the sound of sobbing children. Then the spell faded. Two of them scurried forward, attacking Korin and Ardan. One struck Ardan deeply, slashing open her side and infecting her with the same foul disease.

Cyra, breathing hard, unleashed another Fireball — this time engulfing the last trio. One was turned to ash. The others, burned and shrieking, lunged again. Gundur met them. With a roar, he cut the legs from one and split its chest in two. Indra loosed two arrows — one for each eye — dropping another into stillness.

Only one remained. It pounced for Cyra — and Korin caught it mid-step with a thrust that impaled it through the gut. It gurgled the word "Ardan…" and then collapsed.

Breathing heavily, soaked with blood and bile, the party stood amid the corpses. The mimicry had ended. The whispers were gone.

They found a dry alcove behind a broken arch and set up a quick perimeter, torchlight low, weapons out. Korin, calm as always, took out a small leather pouch of crushed balmroot and duskmarrow, blending them into a thick poultice. One by one, he laid hands on Indra, Cyra, and Ardan, whispering healing words as he cast Lesser Restoration, purging the infection from their blood.

Cyra and Ardan sipped healing draughts in silence. Gundur leaned on his sword, quietly checking the others for wounds.

The crypt wasn't empty. Amid the grime and skeletal remains of previous adventurers, they uncovered a rotting chest, half-sunken in brackish water and bound in rusted iron.

Inside were a longsword in perfect condition, wrapped in oilskin, its hilt shaped like a snarling serpent. A black opal ring, engraved with celestial symbols. A sealed potion bottle glowing faintly green. A chain coif of silver links, unnaturally light to the touch. A bundle of old parchment scrolls, waterproofed in waxed linen, the topmost one labeled in Draconic.

They said nothing as they packed the items away. The whispers might be gone, but the air still felt wrong.

And ahead, the tunnel continued.

Their boots sloshed through ankle-deep sludge as the party pressed deeper into the sewers beneath Goldor City. The air had grown hotter, more humid, and foul with an earthy rot that clung to the skin and turned every breath into a gagging effort. Slime-lined bricks glistened in the glow of Ardan's dancing lights, and ahead, a wider tunnel yawned open like a gullet. Gundur grunted, sword resting across his shoulder. "Feels wrong. Like something's... breathing," he muttered.

Korin motioned for silence. From deeper within the black, something stirred. A wet rustling, like mushrooms growing too fast. Then came the sound of flesh tearing from stone—and from the filth, two abominations emerged. Hulking shapes, glistening with mycelial membranes, each the size of a small wagon. Their tendrils dragged across the ground as their fungal sacs twitched and pulsed with bile: Filthwretch Mycoids.

Indra was the first to react, loosing two arrows into the nearest monstrosity. One lodged deep, drawing a spray of black ichor, but before she could notch another, it surged toward her with a gurgling hiss. The creature lashed at her with wet tendrils. The first strike nearly swept her off her feet, while the second sent her into the wall, her vision darkening as her limbs stopped responding.

Gundur charged the same beast, cutting into its soft flesh with practiced strikes, though spores began to rise in a choking cloud around them. Cyra's voice rang out in the gloom, his wand of fireballs erupting with raw power. A massive blast filled the chamber, illuminating the sewer walls in crimson light as the two Mycoids were engulfed in flame.

The second monstrosity roared without breath, swelling and then rupturing a sac on its flank —a Bloatburst. Foul bile and necrotic fluid exploded outward, catching Cyra, Gundur, and Indra in the wave. Gundur staggered, coughing, barely able to stay standing. Indra dropped, unconscious and unmoving in the rising sludge.

Ardan retaliated swiftly, sending magic missiles crashing into the wounded Mycoid, while Korin rushed forward, placing himself between Indra's body and the enemy. He swung his sword and called upon divine strength, hacking into its limbs and radiant fungal hide.

With one of the creatures staggering, Indra awoke thanks to Ardan's healing spell, and with barely enough strength to rise, she loosed another arrow straight into the monster’s head, ending its vile struggle.

But the second Mycoid was still active, its sporecloud choking the chamber. Gundur collapsed after a crushing blow. Cyra, unable to dodge the tendrils that followed, was hurled into the muck and knocked unconscious as well. It was only then, through desperation, that Ardan raised her hand and incinerated the beast with a perfectly aimed fireball, blasting it into a smoking heap of twitching sludge.

Korin quickly tended to Gundur, calling upon divine grace to revive him. With his final spell, he cast Lesser Restoration to purge the spores infecting Indra. The others followed suit, drinking healing potions with shaky hands as they rested beside a half-collapsed drainpipe.

Amid the Mycoid remains and scattered debris, they discovered the half-digested body of a sewer scout from the city guard. Strapped to his decaying form was a potion belt with two intact vials of greater healing, a pouch holding twenty platinum pieces and a small black opal, and a curious charm in the shape of a curled mushroom, faintly glowing and warm to the touch. Ardan identified it as a charm of fungal resilience, pulsing with latent spore-magic. Tucked into a rotproof scroll tube was a message sealed with a city sigil—a summons marked for the mayor's office, never delivered. Another clue, perhaps, to what lies deeper below.

The further the party pushed through the sewage tunnels, the more the air changed. The stink of waste gave way to something older, heavier, like the breath of centuries past. The walls, once slick stone carved for water flow, began to show blocks older than Goldor itself—huge slabs of black granite fitted with uncanny precision. Moss clung to the cracks, and bones half-embedded in the mortar whispered of ages when no city had yet risen above. The sewer had bled into something far older: crypt tunnels that predated the founding of Goldor, built in forgotten days when death was honored in darker ways.

Here, the sound of dripping water was replaced by echoes that carried too long, like whispers following too close. Shadows gathered thick, and every step felt like trespass. The adventurers pressed on, the torchlight catching carvings worn almost smooth—symbols of gods not worshiped in the city above, their meanings long lost.

Then the tunnel opened into a larger chamber. The stone room was broad, its ceiling vaulted and black with centuries of smoke. At its center stood a bloody altar, freshly defiled. A goat’s head, eyes glassy and mouth frozen in a bleat, had been placed upon it. Before the altar, a great iron bowl brimmed with hacked pieces of its body, blood still steaming faintly. Torches flared in sconces along the walls, their flames guttering as if disturbed by unseen breath. The walls themselves were hung with tattered banners, each bearing the mark of a spider, its legs stretched wide across faded black cloth.

In the corners, moss crept upward, wet and clinging, as if feeding on the death rites of the chamber. Upon the altar, half-buried beneath the goat’s head, lay an open book, its pages

thick with inked runes and jagged illustrations of bone and decay. Candles guttered around it, dripping black wax that pooled like coagulated blood.

Five figures knelt in front of the altar. They wore robes once scholarly, now fouled with soot and old gore. Their lips moved in unison, muttering guttural invocations in a tongue older than the city, their voices weaving together into a chant that crawled beneath the skin. The language was alien, grinding like stone and wet like marrow.

These were no ordinary zealots. They were disciples of one called the Angry Cultist, and their very presence reeked of decay and madness. Once they had been scholars of death, thinkers drawn to the border of life and what lay beyond. But where others turned back, they had gone deeper, following her—the "Mouth of Endings." Her attempts to draw forbidden necrotic energy through her own body had warped her into something foul. Her skin was pallid, her teeth blackened, her breath a carrion stench. Her spells, powerful yet unstable, cracked and sputtered with chaotic energy, lashing out even at her own followers. And yet these five knelt in worship, believing her failures to be divine revelation.

Their chant trembled with devotion, their eyes rolled white in their sockets as they pressed their foreheads against the stone floor. They spoke words of dissolution, of the unraveling of flesh and the glory of rot. Their voices rose, cracked, and fell, shivering the air around the altar. At their feet squirmed clusters of diseased rats, chittering and writhing as one.

Here, in this hidden crypt, death was not merely studied—it was praised, worshiped, and fed.

The lead cultist tilted her head at an impossible angle, her voice a rasping prayer that echoed off the stone. Then the swarm surged forward, and the chamber erupted into chaos.

Indra struck first, two arrows flying in rapid succession. One shattered the shoulder of the lead cultist, the other sank deep into her side. Cyra followed, flicking his wand with a snarl—fireball surged down the center of the chamber, engulfing all five cultists and the plague swarms in a sphere of blinding flame. The blast roasted the swarms instantly and left three cultists screaming as they staggered, cloaks alight and flesh blistered.

Ardan swept her hands outward, releasing a quartet of fire-laced rays toward the least wounded of the cultists. Three struck true, scorching the woman's shoulder and chest. The cultists retaliated—one attempted to cast a spell, but her magic backfired in a wild burst of necrotic energy, instantly killing her and injuring Cyra. Another succeeded, and a roiling wave of blight slammed into Gundur with horrific force, sapping the life from his limbs and blackening veins beneath his skin.

Gundur roared through the pain and charged the caster who had dared to attack him, his blade cleaving into her chest with a spray of blood. Korin followed with precise strikes, slicing through the robes of another cultist who now trembled beneath the weight of radiant judgment.

Just as the party pressed the advantage, Cyra launched another fireball into the rear of the chamber. The explosion lit the air with sulfurous heat—when the smoke cleared, only one

cultist remained standing, her illusions flickering. Ardan calmly raised her hand and loosed four shimmering bolts of magical force, each one slamming into her chest. She collapsed without a sound, her final breath swallowed by the silence of the chamber.

Still breathing hard, the group regrouped. Korin immediately placed a hand on Ardan and muttered the words of Lesser Restoration, clearing the poison from her veins. Cyra coughed, favoring his side, while Gundur slumped against the wall, blood running freely from his armor.

They took a moment to rest, tending wounds and passing around potions with trembling hands. The room was still save for the sizzling of scorched rat flesh and the soft crackle of embers along the stone floor.

While the others rested, Indra swept the chamber for valuables. Behind the altar she uncovered a rusted lockbox, its latch long corroded. Within lay a dark ritual dagger, its edge warm to the touch and etched with Abyssal runes. Ardan confirmed its magical aura. A scroll bearing the spell Animate Dead was found wrapped in wax cloth, along with a pouch of gold and obsidian stones.

The party left behind the desecrated altar chamber where the chanting cultists had fallen beneath their blades and spells. The air in the dark tunnel pressed damp and heavy as they moved on, Cyra’s torchlight throwing shadows that stretched like grasping fingers along the walls. The passage turned left, narrowing into a low, dripping corridor where moss clung thick to the stone. Their boots splashed in shallow black water, the echo carrying unnervingly far into the dark.

For a time they walked in silence, only Gundur's labored breathing and the faint hiss of Cyra's torch filling the air. At the next bend they turned right, entering a broader hall where the ceiling arched into darkness. Here the ground was slick, the stone floor uneven.

That was when they heard it—the wet, sloshing drag of something enormous shifting above them.

Before they could react, two shapes pulled free from the walls and ceiling, sliding down with a sickening squelch. The things towered, their massive bodies shifting in translucent waves of green and black. Their ridged forms gleamed in the torchlight, their undulating maws splitting wide to reveal rings of teeth constantly forming and tearing. Acid hissed on the stone as they surged forward—Greater Slimes, monstrous amalgams of fused oozes.

"By the gods," Ardan whispered, her face pale. "They've been here for centuries."

"No time for wonder," Gundur barked, drawing his greatsword. "Come and try me, filth!"

The first slime lunged, its maw tearing into Gundur and dragging him into its body. He cursed, hacking wildly even as acid burned across his arms. Indra fired arrows as quickly as she could, each shaft sinking deep into the quivering mass but hardly slowing it down. "Hold on, Gundur!" she shouted, though her voice carried a tremor she could not hide.

The second slime engulfed Cyra, its maw wrapping around him like a living vice. The dwarf cried out, his voice muffled by slime, before vanishing in a burst of violet light. He reappeared thirty feet away, coughing up black filth and raising his wand. "Enough!" With a sharp gesture he unleashed a roaring fireball, the chamber lighting with searing flame. The slimes shrieked and bubbled as the fire charred their outer shells.

Ardan rushed forward, chanting words of restoration, her hand glowing as she pressed it toward Gundur. The acid eating through his veins dissipated, but the warrior still roared as the slime crushed him tighter. "I'll kill you yet, you stinking pitspawn!" He forced his sword upward, stabbing deep into the ooze. Black ichor sprayed across his armor as he hacked free space around himself.

Korin loosed arrows with grim precision, his face pale under the flickering torch. One shot struck true, sinking into the pulsing core of the slime, making it shudder violently. "These things are endless," he hissed, "but everything breaks if you hit it right."

The second slime turned its gaping maw on Korin, lashing around him and dragging him into its body. Acid seared into his flesh as he gasped, struggling to keep his footing. "Get this filth off me!"

Indra answered with another volley of arrows, and Cyra, teeth clenched, hurled a bolt of crackling lightning down the length of the tunnel. The slime quivered under the blast, parts of it hissing away in foul-smelling steam.

Finally Gundur drove his sword upward in a furious strike, splitting the first slime in half. With a hideous gurgle it collapsed, bursting into smaller ooze fragments that writhed before

burning under Cyra's next fireball. The second slime staggered as Ardan called holy light down upon it, radiant fire searing through its body. With one last writhing convulsion, it melted into sludge that steamed and hissed across the stones.

The chamber was silent again save for the ragged breathing of the party. The air reeked of scorched ooze, the ground slick with black ichor. Gundur staggered, acid burns smoking along his arms. Korin leaned against the wall, his breath sharp and pained, his skin blistered where the slime had held him.

"By every cursed god in the underdeep," Gundur groaned, fishing a potion from his belt. "That's the last time I let myself get swallowed." He uncorked it and downed the contents, color slowly returning to his face.

Korin drank his own, wiping blood from his mouth. "They're getting worse the deeper we go. First cultists, now this. What's waiting next?"

Cyra smirked faintly, though his robes were scorched and tattered. "Whatever it is, it will burn. Same as these."

Ardan's voice was calm but weary. "We've survived. That is enough for now. Drink, rest your strength—we'll need it before long."

Indra said nothing, but her eyes lingered on the slick piles of dissolving ooze. She shivered once, unsure if it was from the chill or from fear, then bent to clean her blade in the muck.

Together, bruised and battered, they leaned against the walls of the ancient crypt tunnel, their healing potions working slowly through their veins, knowing the darkness ahead would not be any kinder.

The party pressed deeper into the crypt-tunnels, the torchlight licking across stone walls as their boots echoed in the silence. The air felt close, heavy with damp earth and old rot. Gundur spat on the ground and muttered, "We're too deep in this rat's nest."

Korin trudged behind him, bow ready, muttering under his breath. "A purse full of coin wasn't worth this. Not cultists, not slimes, not crawling through the guts of the city. Let the thief rot in her den. We should've walked away."

But they didn't. They pushed further, guided more by stubbornness than sense, until at last a faint light glimmered ahead.

The tunnel widened into a low stone room, a wooden door slightly ajar. Indra crept forward first, easing it open just enough for them to peer inside.

The chamber beyond had the unmistakable stink of habitation. Tables stood cluttered with mugs of stale ale and scattered dice. Daggers lay carelessly on a board, their blades nicked and stained. Wooden crates and barrels lined the walls, stacked in careless piles, while a rough counter had been built across one side of the room as if to serve drink. The walls bore

stretched animal skins as decoration, their faded hides curling at the edges. Torches burned low in iron brackets, shadows quivering across the chamber.

The party stepped in cautiously, weapons drawn, but no one was there. The silence was too complete, broken only by the dripping of water somewhere in the distance.

They searched further, slipping into the back. A long dormitory stretched out, with at least twenty wooden beds lined in two rows. At the foot of each sat a small chest, the kind a thief might keep a pouch of coins or a stolen trinket in. The smell of unwashed bodies still lingered, proof enough that the place was well used.

Ardan's eyes narrowed. "This is no camp. It's a guild den. We've stumbled into the belly of Goldor's thieves."

Gundur gave a dark grin. "Good. Then we can cut the belly open."

They moved on, the corridor bending until it led to another chamber, another door half open. From within came voices, the murmur of a gathering. The party froze, exchanging glances, then pressed close to the door.

A man's voice carried clear, harsh and commanding.

"…You'll take the market streets at dusk. Nobles don't watch their purses when they're drinking in the taverns. They'll pay for silk, and you'll take their coin before they make it home. No stragglers. No witnesses."

The voice grew firmer, barking orders. "Dorin, your lot covers the riverfront. Boats unloading late, sailors stumbling with pockets heavy. They won't remember your faces if you hit fast.

"Saleth, you keep to the east quarter. The brothels will be ripe this week. Pimps carrying gold to pay their women. Take it off them before they're through the doors.

"And you—" a pause, followed by the scrape of chalk on wood, "—you'll see here, on the map. This is Mavar Street. A noble's carriage passes every two nights. Last week it carried silks. This week it will carry coin. Break the wheels, box them in, take the lot. Kill the drivers if you must. Leave nothing that ties to us."

The adventurers dared a glance through the crack. Inside, a dozen thieves sat or stood in loose formation, leaning on spears, knives, or just arms folded, listening to the man at the front. He was broad-shouldered, with a scar down his jaw and a wolfskin cloak hanging from his shoulders. A map of Goldor had been tacked to the wall behind him, fresh chalk marks outlining routes, ambush points, and tavern names. This was their master, and he spoke with the certainty of a man who owned the streets.

The halfling woman was there too, perched on a bench, smirking as if the world belonged to her nimble fingers. Near the back leaned another familiar face—Magor, the tall man from the Golden Sheep, pipe now tucked at his belt, eyes narrowed as he listened.

The party drew back from the crack, their hearts steady, hands tightening around weapons. They had followed a stolen coin purse into the underbelly of Goldor, and now they found themselves crouched outside the den of the thieves' master himself.

Korin whispered, his voice like flint. "We've found them all. The question is whether we leave quietly—or burn their nest to the ground."

The others said nothing, only readied themselves in silence, listening as the thief master's voice echoed on. The time for choices would end the moment they pushed that door.

Then Gundur slammed the door open with his leg, almost cracking it off the hinges, yelling : "Here you are maggots !". The thieves grabbed their weapons and the fight begun.

Indra's bowstrings thrummed before he finished the sentence. Arrows buried into the nearest thief, dropping him instantly. Korin's sword caught another mid-sprint, and Ardan unleashed a crackling bolt of fire that scattered two more into the walls. The party fought with precision. But then the main thief —Whispers-in-Smoke—moved.

He vanished into shadow, reappearing behind Indra. A blur of blades, a flash of steel—she gasped and dropped to a knee, bleeding badly. Cyra turned, raised his wand, and launched a fireball into the center of the enemy pack. The roar filled the room, consuming four thieves and scattering the rest.

Still they came. A halfling woman with blood-matted braids hurled knives at Ardan, slashing her side before Indra's arrow took her through the throat. Magor, tall and scarred—faced

Gundur in brutal melee, matching him blow for blow until Gundur's greatsword cleaved him down the middle.

Whispers-in-Smoke danced around them all. He struck Korin hard, nearly dropping him, then vanished again before the ranger could react. Cyra tried to hit him with a second spell—but the thief's blade found his ribs first. Cyra went down, bleeding heavily beside Ardan, who was struck unconscious by another thief.

Soon, only Gundur and Indra were upright. Korin was bleeding out. Ardan was unconscious. Cyra lay dying. Still, Indra held the line, dropping two more thieves with relentless archery. Gundur, howling with rage, surged through the smoke and hacked down a third. Firelight flickered as Ardan awoke long enough to cast one final, desperate fireball—catching Whispers-in-Smoke squarely and burning half his face away.

But the rogue wasn't done. He vanished and struck Indra in the back, sending her collapsing into darkness. Then he turned on Korin, finishing his fight as he tried to crawl away. It was nearly over.

Gundur turned, eyes blazing, and with two mighty strikes nearly cut the rogue's legs out from under him. The thief staggered, barely standing. Ardan, weak but conscious, lifted her hand one last time and cast a firebolt.

It struck home.

Whispers-in-Smoke, burned and broken, collapsed in a hiss of steaming blood.

Silence fell. Only Gundur and Ardan stood. Three of their companions lay unconscious or dying. The floor was littered with bodies, blood, and the scent of smoke and scorched leather. And still, the party endured.

They would survive. But only just.

The silence after battle was always the strangest thing—louder than swords, louder than screams. In the aftermath of the ambush, the old chamber beneath Goldor's sewers smelled of smoke, iron, and sweat. Flickering firelight played along ancient stone pillars now scorched black from Ardan's repeated firebursts. The last echo of footsteps died with a final thud: the masked thief commander known only as *Whispers-in-Smoke* fell to his knees, flames crackling over the edges of his cloak before he slumped forward into the ash and blood.

Gundur stood tall over the body, chest heaving, sword heavy with gore. His armor was scorched and slick with his own blood, but he hadn't let himself fall—not yet. He turned at the sound of a strangled cough—Cyra lay sprawled across broken crates, bleeding from two deep gut wounds, eyes glassy. Without hesitation, Gundur dropped to his knees and fumbled for a potion flask. His gauntlet hands trembled as he pressed the vial to his comrade's lips.

"Don't you damn die on me, brother," he muttered.

Cyra's eyes fluttered. Then he jerked forward, coughing and gasping as the healing magic took root. “That bastard nearly carved out my soul,” he rasped.

Near the chamber’s rear wall, Ardan crawled, dragging herself through dust and blood. She reached Korin’s side, who lay slumped next to a pile of dead rats and a half-melted crossbow. His pulse was there—barely. She whispered a cantrip to light her hand, guiding the healing draught she had saved for emergencies. The ranger sputtered awake with a wince, gripping his side and groaning, “How bad is it?”

“Better than being dead,” she replied.

They were four again. But Indra hadn’t moved.

Cyra, still weak, forced himself to crawl toward her. The archer lay face down, two throwing knives buried in her back, blood pooled beneath her. He rolled her gently, chanting a healing word through cracked lips. Light shimmered beneath his fingers, and her chest rose—then again, stronger. She coughed once and opened her eyes with a flinch. “Did we get them all?”

“Every last one,” Cyra said, and flopped beside her.

Only then did they look around at the carnage: eleven thieves lay dead in the chamber, their bodies strewn among shattered crates, ritual candles, and rat-chewed bags. One of them, a halfling woman with a cascade of bloody braids—, Gundur remembered—had fought with ferocity unmatched, shrieking as she leapt at Ardan before being cut down midair by Indra's arrows. Another had been an older man, perhaps once a soldier—Magor, they heard one of the others yell—who had stood toe-to-toe with Gundur longer than most.

And Whispers-in-Smoke—their leader—lay at the center of it all, face cracked open, revealing half of a sneering face. He had been quick, brutal, almost inhuman in how he moved. But even that wasn’t enough.

The party took their time recovering. Potions were sipped slowly. Wounds bound. Korin cast Lesser Restoration on Indra and Cyra, purging the foul poison that still lingered in their blood. For a long while, no one spoke. Then Gundur rose and began checking the bodies.

From Whispers-in-Smoke’s body, they recovered a fine dagger of blackened silver, enchanted faintly with illusion magic. Hidden inside a boot was a velvet scroll tube—containing a spell scroll of Greater Invisibility and a map marked with sewer passages under Goldor’s eastern walls. Tucked in his belt pouch was 80 gold, six jet-black dice carved from obsidian , and a signet ring bearing a crest none of them recognized.

The halfling thief had on her a cloak of resistance, slightly singed but intact, and a pouch of dust that Korin identified as Dust of Disappearance.

Magor had once worn military armor beneath his leathers—stitched into the lining of his jerkin was a medal of valor from the Crowned Campaign, now worth more to collectors than patriots. Beside him lay a potion of climbing, still sealed.

A locked iron coffer in the corner, trapped with a simple poison needle (which Gundur spotted before it struck anyone), held 250 gold, 240 silver, and a broken wand with necrotic etchings—likely used in whatever cult these thieves once served.

The tunnels seemed to stretch forever as the party limped their way out of the thieves' den. Their boots sloshed in the filth, armor clinking weakly with every step, each of them leaning on the other more than once to keep moving. Gundur carried the cloth sack slung over his shoulder, its grisly weight bouncing against his back—the severed head of Whispers-in-Smoke, the thief master who had commanded half the city's shadows.

"Damn this," Gundur grunted, spitting blood into the dark. "All that fight, all those wounds, just to scrape back what was ours in the first place. A bag of coin hardly worth the scars."

Korin, pale but steady, managed a dry chuckle. "At least we know the thieves won't be troubling the market anytime soon. Though I doubt the city will thank us for it."

Cyra dragged his feet, leaning heavily on his wand like a cane. "We've gutted a den that Goldor's guards wouldn't dare touch. If the guilds have any sense, they'll pay for proof." He nodded toward the cloth sack. "And proof doesn't get clearer than a head."

Indra sighed, brushing her hair back with a hand streaked in grime. "If the guilds don't pay, I'll pin it to their doors myself. The bastard robbed me, and it cost us weeks of strength to settle it. That's worth more than silence."

Ardan's calm voice broke through, though it carried the weight of exhaustion. "We've ended Whispers-in-Smoke, Magor, and the rest. That's not just vengeance. That's balance. Still…" She glanced around at the pale faces and bandaged wounds. "Balance has left us nearly broken."

They reached the hatch at last, the rotten wood groaning as Gundur forced it open. One by one they hauled themselves up into the cold air of the slums, their bodies aching with every motion. The night sky felt strange after so many hours in the dark, almost too wide.

Their return to the Golden Sheep was silent. They trudged in, earning only a glance from Milonda, who clucked her tongue and waved them to a table. Water was brought, bread with it, and they devoured both in weary silence. Soon after, they dragged themselves upstairs, collapsing into their beds without even removing half their gear.

Days passed before they could walk without groaning at every step. Weeks before the last of their cuts stopped aching and the bruises faded to yellow. The Golden Sheep became their haven during that time—warm baths, steady food, endless mugs of water and, for Gundur, ale enough to keep the edge of pain at bay.

One evening, when the fire crackled bright and their wounds no longer stung so sharp, they sat together at a table, the sack with Whispers-in-Smoke's head resting on the floor beside Gundur's chair.

Gundur slapped his mug down and grumbled, “We’ve bled enough for this damned city. Let’s see if the Fighters Guild has any bounty for the bastard’s head. Might as well get more than sore bones out of it.”

Korin puffed his pipe, smoke curling lazily. “If there is, it’ll be hidden in their records. Bounties on thieves don’t make the city look good. They’ll want proof. We have that.”

Indra’s lip curled. “If they try to cheat us, I’ll show them how many thieves lie dead under the streets. Whispers-in-Smoke isn’t just some street rat. He was the heart of their filth.”

Cyra smirked faintly, though his eyes were tired. “If there’s gold to be had, I’ll take it. If not, I’ll settle for watching the guildmasters squirm when we drop a head on their polished floors.”

Ardan leaned forward, fingers steepled. “Let’s be clear. We walk in, show them what we’ve done, and we don’t leave until they give us an answer. If they pay, we take it and go. If not—then at least the city knows who cleared the rot from beneath its streets.”

Gundur raised his mug in a half-hearted toast. “Aye. No more chasing rats for free. If Goldor wants its shadows cleaned, they can damn well pay us for the broom.”

The mugs clinked softly, the sound less a cheer than a pact. The plan was set. Tomorrow, they would drag Whispers-in-Smoke’s head to the Fighters Guild and see what coin justice might fetch.

The morning came gray and damp, but the party rose with purpose. Gundur slung the sack with Whispers-in-Smoke’s head over his shoulder, the stench already turning stomachs, and together they made their way through the streets of Goldor toward the Fighters Guild. Citizens gave them wide berth when the smell drifted, muttering as they passed, but the companions cared little.

Inside the guild’s stone halls, the air was cooler, filled with the muted clang of steel from the training yard. Along the main corridor hung the bounty board, plastered with sketches and crude notes. The party crowded around, eyes scanning the wall until Korin’s pipe tipped upward toward one paper in particular.

The rough charcoal sketch was unmistakable. Beneath it read:

Whispers-in-Smoke – Wanted for murder, robbery, muggings, unlawful sales of moonshine, kidnapping.
Reward: 650 gold.

Gundur grinned through his beard. “There he is. Rotten face and all.”

Indra muttered, “Let’s see them squirm when we drop him on the table.”

They marched straight into Irit’s chamber. The towering guildmaster sat behind his desk, scarred arms crossed, watching them enter with eyes sharp as drawn steel.

Without a word, Cyra hefted the sack, slammed it onto the table, and said flatly, “We’re here to collect.”

The sack slumped open, and the stench filled the room. Irit leaned forward, pulling the head free by its hair. The skin was half-burned, the features swollen with decay, but recognition slowly dawned in his eyes. Then the man burst into laughter, a booming sound that filled the chamber.

“By the gods!” Irit roared. “You got the bastard! That useless snake’s been plaguing this city for years. Hells, we’ve sent whole squads after him and never got more than a boot print.” He dropped the head back into the sack with a wet thud, shaking his head in disbelief. “And you lot—five ragged souls—walk in and dump him on my table.”

He stood, crossed to a heavy iron safe in the corner, and pulled out two neat bags of coin. Turning back, he tossed one onto the desk with a heavy clink. “Six hundred and fifty, as promised.” He hefted the second bag, then grinned and tossed it down beside the first. “And another two hundred, for initiative. That’s the kind of work I like to see in this guild.”

Gundur snatched up the coin with a grunt. “About time this city paid us for nearly dying.”

Irit raised an eyebrow. “Nearly dying, was it? Tell me how you pulled it off.”

Korin leaned on his bow, smoke curling from his pipe as he answered. “Chased a halfling through the sewers. Stumbled onto their den. More thieves than I’d have thought fit under the city. We nearly didn’t make it out.”

Indra’s voice was sharp. “They weren’t common cutpurses. It was a nest, organized and dangerous. The thief master commanded them like a general. We gutted them all, him included.”

Cyra added with a thin smile, “The fight was blood and filth. But here we stand, and there he doesn’t.”

Ardan folded her arms. “Balance was restored. But we paid in blood for it.”

Irit’s smile broadened. “That’s the way of it, isn’t it? I won’t waste words—you’ve done what no others could. The city owes you more than coin, though don’t expect thanks from every noble’s lips. Some liked their dealings with that rat.”

He dropped back into his chair, leaning heavily on the armrest. “Well done. For now, I’ve no more work for you. The worst thorn in this city’s side has been plucked out. You’ve earned rest.”

Gundur stuffed the gold into his pouch and stood. “Rest sounds fine. Coin sounds finer.”

Irit nodded once, his grin fading into something steadier. “Enjoy both. You’ve earned it.”

The party thanked him, and the guildmaster inclined his head in return. As they turned to leave, the sack with Whispers-in-Smoke’s head still stinking in the corner, the weight of their

victory and the gold in their hands felt like proof that—for once—their suffering had been worth the fight.

The Golden Sheep was alive with laughter that night. The party took their old corner table, the one worn smooth by elbows and spills, and ordered without restraint. Platters of roasted pork, bowls of thick stew, loaves of fresh bread, and pitchers of dark ale covered the table before long. Gundur raised his mug high, foam spilling onto his beard, and shouted, “To being alive! To coin in our purses, and to no more sewer crawling!” The others clinked their mugs to his, laughter rolling from the group like thunder after a storm.

Indra, cheeks flushed from drink, joined the bard in the corner, her clear voice lifting into harmony with his lyre. Patrons turned their heads to listen, and for a time the tavern seemed spellbound, the room wrapped in the beauty of her song. Cyra puffed his pipe contentedly, eyes half-lidded, while Ardan kept time with a soft tap of her hand on the table. Korin, as ever, watched in silence, though even his mouth curved into a small smile.

Their days passed with a newfound ease. With gold enough to live well, they ordered lavish lunches of lamb, fish, and spiced vegetables, washing it all down with deep mugs of ale or the tavern’s chilled summer wine. They walked along the riverbanks when the afternoons grew hot, the water glittering under the sun, barges drifting lazily past with cargo and song. Children played in the shallows, their laughter ringing through the city, and lovers strolled arm in arm beneath the willows.

At times they visited Lord Picard, who greeted them with his usual pomp, filling their cups with wine and their ears with talk of estates and trade. The estate gardens, blooming with roses and heavy with grapes, offered a gentle retreat, and even Indra admitted that the soft wind through the vines eased her restless spirit.

Summer settled over Goldor like a golden cloak. The markets bustled with spice and silk, the air rich with the smell of roasting meats and sweet honey cakes. Nobles rode in carriages along the wide streets, while minstrels played for coins tossed from windows. The guild halls hummed with business, trade thriving now that the shadow of Whispers-in-Smoke had been cut away.

Nights in the Golden Sheep were warm, the tavern’s windows thrown open to let the cool river breeze drift in. Outside, fireflies glimmered in the tall grass beyond the walls. Within, mugs clashed, dice rattled across tables, and voices lifted in song and story.

And so the party, for a time, lived not as hunted adventurers or desperate wanderers, but as friends. They basked in the rhythm of a city alive in summer—its streets full, its skies bright, and its fields rolling green to the horizon. The days stretched long, the nights sweet, and though the shadow of the unknown always lingered at the edge of thought, for now, Goldor and its people thrived beneath the sun.